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# POETRY IN PROSE

by

WALTER DE LA MARE

WARTON LECTURE  
ON ENGLISH POETRY  
BRITISH ACADEMY

1935

FROM THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE  
BRITISH ACADEMY. VOLUME XXI  
NEW YORK:  
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

It is a pleasure to thank Professor Oliver Elton, Dr. D. S. MacColl, Mr. Harry Plunket Greene, and the English Association for permission to use extracts from papers printed by the Association in *Essays and Studies*. I am also indebted to Mr. Fox Strangways for allowing me to quote from an article on music in the *Observer*, to Mr. Robert Frost for his poem, 'I have wished a bird would fly away', and to Professor Elton for his invaluable kindness in reading the proofs of this lecture.

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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## WARTON LECTURE ON ENGLISH POETRY

### POETRY IN PROSE

By WALTER DE LA MARE

*Read 17 July 1935*

THERE are few tributes to his prose style which a scrupulous writer of the present day would accept with more caution than that it is poetical. Even if he were certain that the term was not intended to suggest the merely pretty, the sentimental, fanciful, or decorated, he might still remain a trifle dubious and uneasy. But accepted as a sincere compliment, is it a legitimate compliment? Since from the poetical it is only a step on to the poetic, and only another to poetry itself, can there, then, be such a thing as poetry in prose?

To this question the purist, the precisian would at once reply, No. He would reject the phrase as a confusion in the use of language. Since, he would maintain, the two things in question differ in form, they must also differ in content. They must therefore, if only for clear thinking's sake, be kept severely apart. But even if this is just, is it practicable?

The proper subject-matter of prose, as Wordsworth long ago declared, is Matter of fact—of Science. Poetry is concerned with the truths of the imagination. On this William Blake also insisted, reserving (as for 'vegetation') his own meaning for the word. Cardinal Newman went farther. He refused to concede to the language of science even the status of 'literature'. Literature, in his view, is the personal and individual use of language. He suggested, however, no term, I think, for the kind of writing which is appropriate solely to science. It would perhaps be of little use, since there must be many shades of difference between a verbal style that is proper solely to exact science or to expository science, and that excellent use of language which is acceptable as a sound or a fine prose. Can this to any extent be true also of fine prose as compared with poetry? Is fine prose also capable, however inadequately, of expressing the truths of the

imagination? Has there always been this rigid distinction between them? 'Pherecydes of Syros,' says Pliny, 'in the daies of King Cyrus, invented first the writing in prose.' Yet even here, I gather, it was the 'poetic elements' that 'seemed to have held a predominant place'. And Pherecydes was the original spirit who may also have taught his disciple Pythagoras the doctrine of the transmigration of souls.

The term prose first appeared in the English language about 1330, but was not, it seems, opposed to poetry until 1561. It was thus used about sixty years afterwards by Milton: 'Sitting here below in the cool element of prose.' He relates too that when in his youth he set himself a task in composition either in English or in another tongue, 'whether prosing or versing, but chiefly the latter, the stile by certain vital signs it had' was deemed 'likely to live'. He makes no sharp distinction between them, then. A century after that, the word took to itself a sorry helpmeet, *prosaic*, signifying drab, commonplace, dull, tame. It is now a loose convenience, covering an immense range of human intercourse—from nursery and nursemaid chatter to *The Advancement of Learning*, from schoolboy jargon to *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Indeed the moment the word is uttered, one needs a lynxlike circumspection to avoid referring to Molière's Monsieur Jourdain: 'Par ma foi! Il y a plus de quarante ans que je dis de la prose sans que j'en susse rien.'

Since, however, nowadays they are commonly dissociated, even if the division between them is as difficult to specify with complete precision as that between instinct and intelligence, could even a literary anarchist approve the cutting away of any dam, however artificial it may be, that severs the pure mountain tarn called poetry from the vast chaotic sea of prose? Nevertheless, as Sir Philip Hartog in his Essay, *On the Relation of Poetry to Verse*, has intimated, poets and critics so diverse and authoritative as Sidney, Coleridge, Shelley, Mill, Stevenson, and Dr. Mackail have been at least dubious concerning the dam.

And what of the form as distinct from the content—what

of the technical differences? Here the only precise antithesis of prose is not poetry but verse—a succession of syllables, that is, forming a perceptible metre. Wordsworth accepted this, prose—verse, as the only ‘strict antithesis’, though he himself modifies his ‘strict’. And every dictionary I have consulted defines the word prose thus negatively—as language *without* a metrical structure.<sup>1</sup> The only exception has been *The Dialect Dictionary*. Here we are told that the

<sup>1</sup> Metre itself is declared to be ‘any form of poetic rhythm, its kind being determined by the character and number of the feet . . . of which it consists’; or, ‘the property of a verse that is divided into a determined number of metrical feet (sometimes quantitative feet), or syllabic groups’; a foot being that which consists ‘of a number of syllables, one of which has the ictus or principal stress’. It is unfortunate that the term rhythmical is frequently used to mean ‘metrical’. As recently as 1926 Sir Edmund Gosse, in his article on poetry in Chambers’s *Encyclopaedia*, so used the word: ‘Until the passion and the truth are fused into actual speech, and until that speech takes a rhythmical form, those elements may be as “poetical” as you please, but they do not form poetry.’ And in an earlier sentence, ‘but to the primitive conception of poetry rhythm is absolutely necessary’. There are definitions more searching and elaborate, but in the presence even of these—and nothing is here said of time, phonal character or pause—the emblem of the serpent with its tail in its mouth slips into the mind. Even the ictus or ‘principal stress’ in a foot is a term for a phenomenon that is apparently beyond final analysis. Learned and devoted experts continue to disagree, and yet the successful versifier may himself be only five or six years old! Moreover, any sequent metrical ‘syllabic groups’—of iambs, trochees, dactyls and so forth—more closely resemble shoes than feet; since as regards grace, delicacy, and effect they are themselves far less vital than what they contain. The prosodist may call the tune; only the Pied Piper can divinely both play and dance.

‘Au point de vue poétique’, runs the definition of rhythm in *Larousse Universel*, ‘(dans les vers mesurés ou rythmiques) comme au point de vue musical, le rythme est constitué par le retour, à intervalles égaux, d’un son (syllabe ou note de musique) plus fortement accentué que les autres et nommé “temps fort”. Dans les vers mesurés, par exemple dans la versification française, le rythme repose sur les césures, la longueur et le nombre des différents vers employés. La prose n’est pas non plus dépourvue de rythme: il n’est pas de bon orateur ou de bon écrivain qui ne rythme sa phrase, et chez certains prosateurs, comme Chateaubriand, elle revêt presque une allure poétique.’

romantic Highlanders once referred to those who merely talked—the despised Sassenach, no doubt—as ‘prose-folk’; and that in days gone by a blockhead in certain parts of England was known as ‘prose-hash’—a phrase at whose decease no modest lecturer is likely much to grieve.

On the other hand there is an abundance of prose in our superb English that is more simple, sensuous, and passionate than a large quantity of verse in the same tongue, which was, we must charitably assume, at least intended to reveal these rare characteristics. Although then, strictly speaking, poetry must be in verse, by no means everything in verse is poetry. There is indeed no reason, if the man-of-fact can manage it, why science itself—‘ascertained’ knowledge, that is—should not still be propounded in verse. His medium would then exhibit yet another abstruse, though perhaps only a minor, science. He might thus far more easily be learned by rote, if not by heart. He would, too, be following the example of Lucretius, Tusser and Erasmus Darwin; even if he were tempted to let *poetry* go hang. Purely informative rhymes—the scourge of childhood—are not only the more memorable for being in verse; they are also little less serviceable if they are wholly prosaic in kind and none too secure even in their grammar. ‘Common are to either sex, Artifex and opifex . . .’ may remain a statement somewhat cryptic to any twelve-year-old who fails to catch the signification of ‘common’ and cannot conceive what connexion there can be between words and sex; but it may none the less save him from an occasional howler, and its consequences, in his prose-hash. So with ‘Thirty days . . .’, ‘A red sky . . .’, and this little dissertation on poisons which at any critical moment may prove a godsend:

An alkali swallowed!—to make the patient placid  
For alkali corrosives give an acid.  
An acid swallowed!—then reverse the matter  
And give an alkali to kill the latter.  
The acid antidotes in household use  
Are table vinegar and lemon juice.

What alkalis there are need no revealing—  
Take whitewash, chalk, or plaster from the ceiling.

In respect to its skill, variety, finish and value, mere verse may range from a doggerel, flat and empty, to one of the most lively and pregnant means of self-expression. Alert, nimble, witty, cogent, at times humorous or sentimental, occasionally touched with imagination and shot with fancy, the verse of W. S. Gilbert, for example, was treasure trove to its sister art, music. He was a master of its craft; but little of it is likely to be confused with what has been called pure poetry. Indeed, a substantial fraction of the 'poetical works' of some of our greater poets, and a still larger fraction of the whole corpus of English verse that has won its way into print, is in a like case.

If, then, verse is assuredly no guarantee of poetry, are we entitled to declare that—as with the exposition of science and that personal use of language which is alone worthy of the name of literature, so with workaday prose and any order of language which merits the description, 'poetic'—while the differences between them may often be extreme, they may also be so slight as to be barely perceptible? That while pure poetry is a sovereign elixir, a tincture of it may also be precious; that neither elixir nor tincture is by any final edict restricted to verse, and that, as with all things capable of giving aesthetic pleasure, this is a question of gradation and degree.

It is a familiar and well-worn theme. But if the suggestion is no mere *cul-de-sac*, if it is neither so naïve and obvious as to need no illustration, nor so fallacious as not to warrant any, many other questions immediately present themselves. Are such degrees of difference marked, obvious and instantaneous, or slight and gradual? Are they both in cause and in effect superficial or virtual? Are they usually the outcome of accident or of design; of effort or impulse? At what stage, if ever, does the poetic in prose, from being in the nature of a tincture, distil itself, as it were, into an essence? Does the modest inquiry to a competent writer, Shall you treat

your subject in prose or in verse? imply an attack on his artistry, let alone his conscience, or merely on one's own common sense?<sup>1</sup> How far, again, can the craftsman of a sound prose venture in manner and matter in the direction of metrical poetry before he risk the charge of having mistaken his medium? And last, are there in fact writers in prose who, alike in what they say and in how they say it, as truly merit the title of poet as certain writers of verse—little in quantity, it may be, but fine in kind—who have justly been awarded this supreme tribute?

These are questions very easy to put, difficult to answer in any fullness; and they immediately usher us into the presence of such consummate men of letters as Sir Thomas Browne, Francis Bacon, Fuller, Jeremy Taylor, Burton, Ruskin, Lamb, all of whom wrote little in verse; and of others—Jonson, Traherne, Milton, Dryden, Landor, Hardy, Doughty, who in their several degrees achieved a highly individualized style both in that and in prose.

But first, what technical characteristics are to be found in good writing of any order—whether lyrical or dramatic, whether fiction, history or *belles lettres*? All literature consists solely of words in an imposed sequence. The minimum equipment that an author—a craftsman in words—needs is an adequate vocabulary, a knowledge of the construction and grammar of the language he uses, and something worth saying. These secured, in all literary composition it is the perfectly rational and lucid arrangement and order of the chosen subject-matter, the attainment of a beginning, a middle and an end, that are the all but insuperable difficulties. Reading without tears is an accomplishment, and one perhaps self-taught, which is within the reach even of the youngest of the young; whereas writing (an accomplishment

<sup>1</sup> In a preface to *Wessex Poems* Thomas Hardy explains that many of its pieces had been written long ago, and that 'in some few cases the verses were turned into prose and printed as such'. The contrary process is far more unusual, I suppose.



beyond even an Aristotle to impart) without groaning and travailing—is that in any perfection practicable even to a Methuselah? Not unless the testimony of authorities so diverse as Johnson, Rousseau, Flaubert, Darwin, and Newman can be ignored. Knowledge, memories, ideas, opinions, convictions, speculations, images, fantasies, feelings—their very superabundance may be a writer's most formidable obstacle. The richer and more individual his mind and his heart and the more impulsive his genius, so much the more arduous is likely to be the ordeal of communicating them in words, of spinning spider-wise out of his entrails that continuous, tenuous, elastic, vigorous thread and web into a pattern and design that shall best and most fully convey his inmost aim, motive and meaning.

An adequate craft and artistry to this end are equally indispensable in prose and in verse. Every specimen indeed of literature worthy of the name, from a limerick such as 'There was an old man who said "Hush" . . .' to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *The Odyssey*, from the briefest of tales or essays to *The Origin of Species* or *The Golden Bowl*, has an acquired and definite structure.

But apart from using words efficiently, a good writer endeavours to use words well. And this entails attention to the arrangement of verbal sounds. If a writer have no music in his soul, his ear no doubt will be equally defective, and so in this respect will his style be. Otherwise a due heed to verbal harmony and discord is largely the outcome of a natural taste and impulse. Printed words resemble a printed melody in music. They await vocalization. And implied in their use are two sensuous activities, speech and hearing. In English these verbal sounds are numerous enough to afford an inexhaustible variety, and since each such sound either in prose or verse has not only its relative accent, stress, or emphasis, or lack of them, but also its quality, volume, and pitch—its intonation, and is affected by those of its more or less immediate neighbours, this varying harmony, or absence of harmony, is being continually built up and is perishing in

memorized consciousness as we read on. And the making of these sounds is certainly no less an aesthetic pleasure than is the listening to them. Indeed, alliteration, assonance, and all verbal modulations and sequences, whether pleasing or otherwise, at least as closely concern the vocal organs as the ear. These effects, both sensuous and mental, pleasurable or otherwise, cannot be avoided. Leagues away from poetry, the most artless speech exhibits them. And although in childhood we had to learn our mother tongue—apting, as Ben Jonson says, our mouths to letters and syllables, any delight we may find in verbal melody, no less than a delight in colour or form, or for that matter in the savoury or the sweet, were ours from birth. They are the unavoidable, the priceless rudiments of earthly experience.

The term poet ‘cometh’ in Sidney’s words, of this word ποιητήν, to make: ‘wherein I know not whether by luck or wisdom we English men have mett well the Greeks in calling him a maker’. And maker implies a material, a medium, a vehicle which before the maker begins to adopt it to his purposes is in some degree unmade, and also in some degree plastic, workable, adaptable, appropriate, and can be manipulated, dealt with to this extent in accordance with his needs; just as the pictorial artist, having chosen his subject, may render it either with pen or pencil, water-colour or oil, as an aquatint, etching, woodcut or pastel, whichever method he thinks most suitable. Our maker, however, though he needs only writing materials, or, at a pinch, sand and a finger, has ready-made ingredients, verbal units, to deal with. An abundant but not *too* copious a choice is afforded him by a grammar intent in particular on English idioms, and by the great English dictionary; and he may eke out the latter with the native and lovely verbal wildflowers to be found in Dr. Joseph Wright’s bountiful work on the English dialects. This tribute, ‘maker’, therefore, is no less the merited privilege of the craftsman in prose than of the craftsman in verse. And—fantastic ideal!—a perfected prose and a perfected verse alike are in varying

degree dependent on their word-sounds for a virtual part of any pleasure they bestow. Nor surely need there be any bound to that potential pleasure in prose. In so far as it affects the sense to be conveyed it is essential to it. Otherwise it may be deemed subordinate to other aims. In fine verse at any rate this verbal accord, this verbal 'music', has been almost universally accepted as indispensable.

But verbal sounds are not virgin elements. They have and they convey 'meaning'. They are, as it were, in varying degrees either in or out of keeping with what they signify as symbols. They may, as we say, be good words for what they mean, or, on the contrary, uncommonly bad. For this reason no synonym can have precisely the same value as the word it displaces—and this quite apart from its various associations: he hit the deck; he slung his hammock; he went to bed; he retired for the night; he sought his chamber; he made essay to woo sweet Hypnos—they all signify much the same thing, but what worlds apart these same things are!<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> ' . . . No one,' says Andrew Bradley, 'who understands poetry, it seems to me, would dispute this, were it not that, falling away from his experience, or misled by theory, he takes the word "meaning" in a sense almost ludicrously inapplicable to poetry. People say, for instance, "steed" and "horse" have the same meaning; and in bad poetry they have, but not in poetry that *is* poetry.

"Bring forth the horse!" The horse was brought:

In truth he was a noble steed!

says Byron in *Mazeppa*. If the two words mean the same here, transpose them:

"Bring forth the steed!" The steed was brought:

In truth he was a noble horse!

and ask again if they mean the same. Or let me take a line certainly very free from "poetic diction":

To be or not to be, that is the question.

You may say that this means the same as "What is just now occupying my attention is the comparative disadvantages of continuing to live or putting an end to myself." And for practical purposes—the purpose, for example, of a coroner—it does. But as the second version altogether misrepresents the speaker at that moment of his existence, while the first

In all writing, that is, whether in prose or in verse, and whether by intention or otherwise, if we both repeat and listen to the words of which it is composed, two voices are audible and two meanings are inherent—that of the verbal sounds and that of the verbal symbols. Sometimes in open conflict, though never so in fine poetry, usually in a more or less amiable relationship, they may also be in a ravishing harmony; and this in prose no less than verse; the one clearly evident, the other remaining extremely elusive however closely we scrutinize it, and ultimately, perhaps, beyond analysis. Indeed, fully to explore the connexion between sound and meaning would entail not only herculean labour but also the finest sensibility, particularly if not only our own sovereign language, but others also, living or dead, were within the pioneer's range of inquiry.

This implies, naturally, that at any extreme both prose and verse may be falsely or cloyingly melodious, too emphatic, too sonorous, over-sweet, and even pleasing in excess. Too much honey, too little bread. All depends on the fitting relation between the sound and the sense, and the given intention. The meaning of Swinburne's 'Hesperia' (an impassioned and remorseful elegy on the theme of love and lust) may repeatedly elude us largely on account of its otherwise masterly impetuous emphatic volume of sound. Its vehemence mutes its meaning. As Sir Philip Hartog has said of poetry in general, and his words may be applied to certain kinds of prose, it resembles an incantation, but one that lulls and bemuses a rational attention rather than, as it might, arrests and excites it.

At the other extreme, writings both in prose and verse that may be pregnant with a meaning of great value may be in a style so flat, insipid, and lifeless that both ear and

does represent him, how can they for any but a practical or logical purpose be said to have the same sense? Hamlet was well able to "unpack his heart with words"; but he will not unpack it with our paraphrases. . .'

Nor, on the other hand, will he do so if we attempt to improve what he says in prose by putting it into verse!

tongue, and even eye, are in a continual revolt against the duty of transmitting such dismal messages to the mind.

When we give delight without the sacrifice of things more precious, when we enhance the meaning and value of what we say by the charm and grace with which we are saying it—a kind of courtesy and good manners—all this surely is nothing but a gain, whether to prose or to verse. To all devices of verbal music every user of words is entitled to free access—if he can attain it. Failure in this direction is a failure in craftsmanship and art. And though, as with alliteration, a regular and sustained chiming and rhyming may be a delight in verse, and, if it is too obvious, a vexation in prose, if one opens any well-written book at random—my own three examples happened to be Henry James's *Letters*, Samuel Butler's *Note-Books* and the *Apocrypha*—it will probably be found that within art and reason this assonance, chiming, echo, vowel-play, are all but as active in prose, though they are not so easily noticeable there, as they are in verse. Nor is even positive rhyming in prose by any means outrageous. In verse rhyme serves melody, symmetry, balance, helps to secure in varying degree a formal pattern, stresses a pause, satisfies expectation, draws meaning together, and so may be a highly serviceable artifice as well as a very pleasing one. Since, too, a rhyming word is in part a repetition of its fellow and in part not so, it confers on its context its own small burden of unity in variety, and of variety in unity. The wings of a building may be said to rhyme, the figures of a dance, the pattern in a Persian rug; even the wings of a bird, the leaves on a twig, the markings on an animal. In itself, and even poets have disparaged rhyme, it may appear to be a device irrational and childish—that William Wordsworth should have *rhymed* about Immortality!—but only a puritan aridified by a sense of duty could finally condemn it.

Apart from this, the obligation or choice to rhyme in verse may prove either for a sluggish or a rich mind an aid to the revival, and even to the discovery, of ideas and images.

But since on the other hand certain words in English have no rhymes, and many very few (e.g. in the preceding sentence *choice, either, sluggish, revival, idea, image*), this may also be a hindrance to their use and to that of the words they do rhyme with. The help rhyming may give, then, must be set against the difficulty of so persuading the suggested word, together with its relevant object or image or thought, into the confines of the poem as not even to hint at the process. Few defects are so obvious and fatal a snare for a versifier, and even for a Robert Browning, as forced rhymes.

The rhymes, chimings, and assonances of good prose also, since they are apt, serve a purpose. But for the reader's pleasure, and in order to avoid distraction and the appearance of mere ornament, they are seldom conspicuous. In origin they are usually much less deliberate than those in verse, being the outcome of a sensitive ear rather than of a definite intention. The under-mind listens and consciousness obeys. They more closely resemble the *internal* rhymings and assonances of verse; and apart from the ease and pleasure they give to voice and ear, they help to compact the argument and to enforce the sense.

'You shall now *see*, then,' says Cobbett, in his grammar book for his son, 'what pretty stuff is put together and delivered to the Parliament, under the name of King's speeches. The *speech* which I am about to examine is, indeed, a *speech* of the Regent; but I might take any other of these *speeches*'—which is a deliberately flat statement in preparation for the flatness of what he is about to quote; the instruction of his little boy being for the moment less in his mind than his hatred of the Whigs.

And Browne:

And surely it is not a melancholy conceit to think that *we* are all asleep in this world, and that the conceits of this life are as mere dreams to those of the next as the phantasms of the night to the conceits of the day. There is an equal delusion in both, and the one doth but *seem* to be the emblem or picture of the other; we are somewhat more ourselves in our sleeps, and the slumber of the body *seems* to be but the waking of the soul.

And Matthew Arnold:

The pursuit of perfection, then, is the pursuit of sweetness and light. He who works for sweetness works in the end for light also; he who works for light works in the end for sweetness also. But he who works for sweetness and light united, works to make reason and the will of God prevail. . .

The chimings, of course, can be far less open than these, yet by no means less effective. Sir Philip Sidney:

Yet confess I always that as the fertilest ground must be manured, so must the highest flying wit have a *Daedalus* to guide him. That *Daedalus*, they say, both in this and in other, hath three wings to bear itself up into the air of due commendation: that is, art, imitation, and exercise.

Apart here from the play on i, e, u, and m, how *convincing* is the alliteration in the last four words. Pen obeyed idea. And again:

Of the faculty of these pleasant flowers there is nothing set down in the ancient or later Writers, but [they] are greatly esteemed for the beautifying of our gardens, and the bosoms of the beautiful.

Do not the delicate assonances and alliteration here contrive to make one image, as it were, of the gardens and the ladies so decked—like a tie round a bunch of cowslips?

It is of course destructive of their aptness to remove such verbal devices as these from their context, but here is another fragment wherein its aptness just, but only just, edges into Euphuism: 'This undertaking happily perform'd, he return'd with the night; and found Dyonyssophanes at his rest; but Daphnis watching, weeping, and waiting in the Walks.'

And again, an exquisite give and take between *ers* and *o's*:

. . . And therefore it was, that great store of winter birds haunted the bush, for want (it seems) of food abroad; many blackbirds, many Thrushes, Stockdoves, and Starlings, with other birds that feed on berries. Under pretext of birding there, Daphnis came out, his Scrip furnished with Country dainties, bringing with him to persuade and affirm his meaning, snares and lime-twigs for the purpose. The place lay off about ten furlongs; and yet the Snow

that lay unmelted, found him somewhat to do to passe through it. But all things are pervious to Love, even Fire, Water, and Scythian Snowes. Therefore, plodding through, he came up to the Cottage, and when he had shook the Snow from his thighs, he set his snares, and prickt his lime-twigs. Then he sate down, and thought of nothing carefully, but of Chloe and the birds. . .

And here, Lyly himself:

There is in that Isles salt made, and saffron; there are great quarries of stones for building, sundry minerals of quicksilver, antimony, sulphur, black-lead, and orpiment red and yellow. Also there groweth the finest alum that is, vermilion, bittament, chrisocolla, coperus, the mineral stone whereof petroleum is made, and that which is most strange, the mineral pearl, which as they are for greatness and colour most excellent, so are they digged out of the mainland, in places far distant from the shore.

At the best, both in verse and prose, melody and sense are in so close a communion that they almost defy disintegration. On the one hand Coleridge: 'The marble peach feels cold and heavy, and children only put it to their mouths.' And Aldington: 'Hee himself was of an high and comely stature, grey eyed, his haire yellow, and a beautiful personage.' On the other, this scrap of dictation originated and set by a child nine years old for the instruction of her sister of six: 'The snow made the downy hills look like a swan's wings, for it was Christmas time.'

That at the 'tender' age of nine it should be possible so to woo an imaginative perception into words as to make them the envy of ninety, hints not merely at the debt we owe Pherecydes, but that even in the matter of verbal sounds his Pythagorean doctrine was not wholly a heresy.

All fine literary composition entails in its technique a continual subtle verbal mimicry of the objects, images, states of mind and feeling which compose its progressive theme. Clumsy examples—such as expletives and common mime-words—are decisive enough, but fall absurdly short of the full issue. It is by means of the quality and delicacy of this mimicry, as well as of the views and sentiments he is expressing, that we become aware of the self and character of a



writer—of his human status and his mind. And not least of the marvels of which words and their arrangement may be capable are the secrets they are telling about him of which he himself may be wholly unaware.

It is when consciousness is at a fine pitch and in a profound absorption over its task that a writer, whether at work on epic or essay, attains that degree of tension, that vital impulsiveness, heightening of perception, conception, apprehension, comprehension, which alone can bid the rock gush out its waters. This is no more likely to be the result solely of a refined and conscious technique than is a genuine state of mood or feeling—love, delight, generosity, compassion; despair, contempt, hatred. It is far less an affair of art, let alone artifice, than of the artist; and especially if a prolonged and delighted apprenticeship to his craft has made of it almost a second nature.

What then of the devices, not of language, but of thought and rhetoric—metaphor, comparison, simile, and other figures of speech, all of them far more natural and winning than the 'tall, opaque' terms for them suggest. Like most human blessings, the best in these are probably the unsought. Far-fetched they may be, but even these are none the less effective and delightful if they appear in their places as naturally as flowers on a bush of may, or smiles on a pleasant face. At their finest they are evidence not only of a vivid and aptly associated memory, but also of one that has been fed and nourished on objects and experiences best worth the mind's having. 'Nature I loved, and next to Nature Art.' They become part of the technique of our minds and imaginations.

Metaphor indeed so densely throngs our daily speech, lurking like a green tiny moss or creeping lichen in every crevice of it, that, as perhaps with simile also, the vigilant writer's pains are likely to be spent rather on keeping it within bounds than in seeking it out.

Apt similes and other figures of speech, on the other hand,

are usually accepted as admirable in verse, but as in the nature of a delicacy and indulgence in prose. Nevertheless they may be not only an enlivening pleasure in themselves, a momentary release from the matter in hand, little windows revealing a further view, but may serve also as arguments cogent and intellectual, energizing their context by means of analogy as well as example. They resemble the reunion between two charming sisters, whose very unlikenesses to one another give a livelier edge to their resemblances. We may of course prefer a prose, and for that matter a verse also, that is devoid or very sparing of these enticements—but preferences should not be exalted into axioms. It would be folly to lay down any law; since verse of the purest poetry may be all but free from these devices and a good prose liberal in the use of them.

There are, for example, only four similes in so romantic a poem as 'Kubla Khan', one alone of these being conspicuous, the flail. There are only three in the first twenty stanzas of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', the bride 'red as a rose' showing most clearly; and but two in Wordsworth's 'Pet Lamb', a poem wholly simple and tender—over-simple to some tastes, and yet of how delicate a colour and atmosphere. There is only one each in Donne's 'Funeral', in Jonson's 'Jealousy', in Shelley's 'The Two Spirits', in Keats's 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', and his 'Ode to Melancholy', and there are ten in Shelley's 'Skylark'.

The prose of Donne and Jeremy Taylor, on the other hand, abounds in imagery, both simple and complex. Jane Austen's is frugal in this respect, Dryden's imagery is apt as acorn is to cup, De Quincey inclines to be lavish, Dickens is copious in metaphor. Francis Bacon, again, in his essay on Fame, after citing in aid of his theme certain 'flourishes and excellent parables in the poets', suddenly recalls himself and his reader to *terra firma*: 'But we are being infected', he tells us, with 'the stile of the poets. To continue now in a sad and serious manner.' The infection was recurrent. In his brief and unfinished essay on Vain-Glory there are

three similes in a paragraph of only nine lines. But then, as Shelley declared:

Lord Bacon was a poet. His language has a sweet and majestic rhythm, which satisfies the sense, no less than the almost superhuman wisdom of his philosophy satisfies the intellect. . . All the authors of revolutions in opinion are not only necessarily poets as they are inventors, nor even as their words unveil the permanent analogy of things by images which participate in the life of truth; but as their periods are harmonious and rhythmical, and contain in themselves the elements of verse; being the echo of the eternal music. . .

Opinions more widely conflict regarding poets and the merits of their prose than regarding certain writers of a fine, sound, or elegant prose and the merit of their verses. Many prose writers, none the less, have attested the value of learning in childhood to write verse. Thomas Hardy declares that 'the shortest way to good prose is by the route of good verse'. Hazlitt, on the other hand, maintains that 'while the prose style of poets is sometimes good, nay excellent', it is 'never the better, and generally the worse, from the habit of writing verse'.

Hazlitt also, who delighted in begemming his own prose with fragments of borrowed verse—and although Sophocles, Waller, and Tennyson at an exceedingly advanced age suggest otherwise—facetiously remarked, 'The poet's Muse is like a mistress, whom we keep only while she is young and beautiful. . . The Muse of prose is like a wife, whom we take during life *for better, for worse*'—an ample and cynical assertion difficult to prove. Objecting to the florid, he preferred a written style 'such as any one would speak in common conversation who had a thorough command and choice of words, or who could discourse with ease, force, and perspicuity'. These are exacting requirements, but not so exacting as to preclude a poet's being possessed of them.

The sole technical feature, then, apart from rhyme, that severs verse from prose, and therefore—if we accept verse as the only vehicle of poetry—from poetry also, is a certain

regular recurrence of rhythm, of elements of verse, in Shelley's phrase, which we call metre. Indeed, just as intonation may alter the intended meaning of the simplest of sentences, make naivety reveal itself as irony, and a lie as a lie, so varying and mutable rhythms, the incessant delicate *motion* of words—no less apparent, as Hazlitt implies, in good talk than in good writing—are not only a pleasure to utter and to listen to, but are part and parcel of the meaning of the words and the emotions they convey. They duplicate, so to speak, the meaning, and thus condense it, alike in space and time, and therefore in consciousness.

This metrical recurrence must, however, by means of varying rhythms be continually diversified. A sequence of lines all but regularly metrical is perhaps the dullest and clumsiest feat of which language is capable. So also a succession of prose rhythms closely resembling one another soon becomes utterly tedious. Language suggestive of the mechanical, whatever its origin, is so far devoid of the appearance of life, of vital impulse. Indeed, a prose proceeding in a series of cacophonous accents and emphases like the clacking of a rusty chaff-cutting machine is no less intolerable than a verse of the same order. In either kind at their best the rhythms, like the sounds they convey, are in a clear and serene association with their sense. Kindled, various, marked rhythms in any use of language betoken a heightening of the mind. Dead-alive rhythms confess that the fire within has fallen low. The best are those that wholly fit their purpose.

That legitimate and charming elements of *metre* abound in good prose, however, is beyond question. They lie half-concealed even in common speech. As Dr. D. S. MacColl says, 'Verse would be a fantastic, if not an impossible imposition upon language, if the collocations of measured feet out of which it builds its lines were not already present in habitual speech. . . Not only "prose", but ordinary speech, is rhythmic.'

As to Hazlitt's 'common conversation', if at times we

listen to what we are saying—and that, for many reasons, may be a surprising and cathartic experience—we shall hear ourselves echoing *Hiawatha* in such statements as: Won't you have some bread and butter; I am rather hard of hearing; Come and see me then on Monday. We resort to less simple elements in: Is this the nine-fifteen to London Bridge, in, Now mind, I won't have any nonsense, Miss; and, I shall be late, my dear, so don't sit up. Our excited or exhausted correspondence may begin: Dear Sir, I write re your demand for tax | the document in blue; may echo the Spider and the Mock Turtle with, The beef you sent me yesterday was very far from fresh; and with, I'm very much afraid, my dear, poor Millie has the mumps; or we may soar into, Although we now live in the country | I can get to my office with ease.

We cannot open a newspaper without encountering headings and scraps of easily detectable verse, and occasionally verse of a rare species. 'And every day new cinemas | can be seen in process of building'; 'Farmers Demands Refused; | Extension of Strike Expected'; 'Mr. Samuel Samuel M.P. | much about the same'; 'Gordon Richards equals Archer | but rides five losers'.

A single post recently brought me an election address and an American newspaper. Heart cried to heart with 'Come to our Meeting in the Rest House this evening'; with 'Don't forget mass Meeting to-night, Monday November 4'; and with 'Breaker and Farmer of Hard Western Soil'; 'Cash Plus Toil Makes Steel | and the Money Gets the Rewards'; 'Walter Duranty who writes Sea Talks'; 'The Picture World of Shakespeare's Mind'. The last was followed by the far more delicate title of the book concerned, Professor Caroline

Spurgeon's *Shakespeare's Imagery and What it Tells Us*. The following sentences again, pining, like the Peri, for the paradise of verse, are from a recent letter to *The Times* from Mr. Thomas Bodkin: 'The mediaeval cathedral was a blaze of colour, inside and out. | The whole west front was washed with ochre. | The niches were painted red, green, and blue. | The statues were separately coloured. | Their crowns and jewels were touched with gold. | The tide of colour and gold rose even over the roofs.'

Moreover, every good prose will reveal at a heedful reading a marked tendency in its sentence and paragraph construction towards a loosely measurable sequence of a variable pattern, occupying so much time, and therefore its equivalent of sensuous and mental activity—as in a grave and ceremonious minuet. Now the sentence will fall a little short of this vague standard, with pauses of silence completing it; now the words well over a little, but seldom so far as to overload the interval. There is a perceptible poise and accord, balance, symmetry and proportion in correspondence with the march and progress of the thought and the emotion. The metrical—both sensuous and intellectual—may lurk, then, under a fine prose like the concealed relics of ancient buildings or earthworks detectable from the round basket of a balloon beneath a field of wheat. It is far the more effective for being unapparent. It is, too, in fine prose rather than in fine verse that the poet is likely to discover both novel and subtle rhythms which a little or much delicate contriving will convert into the most promising and seductive of metres. The following, found by pure chance, occur in but one paragraph, the first, in *John Inglesant*:

My friend, whose name was Fisher,  
in the lovely summer weather—

which at once tempts fancy into—

Caught a salmon in the Isher  
With a fly made of a feather.

Again,

form wide and fertile valleys  
which are watered by pleasant streams.

And again,

forming long lines along the level summits.

In this one paragraph Shorthouse even rhymes himself:

In my last long vacation  
I accepted his invitation.

De Quincey of course is even more enticing:

A music such as now | I often heard in sleep;

As when Zephyr in the bough

Stirs midnight dark and deep;

The undulations of fast-gathering tumults;

Infinite cavalcades filing off, | and the tread  
of innumerable armies;

Somewhere, but I knew not where—

Somehow, but I knew not how. . .

[Came a vision heavenly-fair,  
Brought its solace to my brow.]

Nor is prose of our own day innocent of these beguilements. In a short story by Mr. Somerset Maugham entitled 'Arabesque' occur these:

But rebuffs can deal more deadly blows than daggers;

Dark dark was the lane outside—and the night an obsidian net;

They could indeed forgive him his sins, but they could not  
forgive him his compassions;

and less detectably:

Cool it is here, she said, and quiet, | but too dark even to see  
your face.

You are cold, he whispered, | touching her bare neck with  
timid fingers.

It is late. | See how the moon [on high] her [dusky] twilight sheds.

And here is Miss Rose Macaulay, with all but a lyric in prose—and this thrown off in a debate!—

This heavenly commodity  
it is a lovely thing.

Freedom;

Leisure;

Nobody in this life was ever bored by liberty.

‘Good prose’, says Lander—and prose, he himself declared, was his ‘study and business’, poetry only and always his ‘amusement’—‘good prose, to say nothing of the original thoughts it conveys, may be infinitely varied in modulation. It is only an extension of metres, an amplification of harmonies, of which even the best and most varied poetry admits but few.’ An extension of *metres*.

Pronounced verbal rhythms, apt and delightful, may constantly recur then in a plain and, more observably, in an emotional or imaginative prose. Even in daily talk any incitement, from anger up to joy, emphasizes rhythm, and perhaps to a degree bordering on metre. The skill of prose is to ensure that its rhythms shall fall short of being openly metrical. An attentive ear alone is likely to perceive them. To make metre of any such rhythmical fragments and to sustain that metre, not only with an adequate variety of rhythm but with one that shall accord with the meaning conveyed—as does some minute poem of Herrick’s—*that* attempt will reveal how remote from one another a fine metrical poem may be and a prose fragment even of the poetical. It is by degrees a flower comes to its completeness; and every such degree has its own particular purpose and beauty.

But all this is no more than a superficial reference to an extremely complicated problem. In an essay on *English Prose Numbers* Professor Oliver Elton submits it to an indefatigable analysis. A few extracts can only suggest its pre-



cision and its range. The single feet, the 'foot units' in prose, he tells us, unlike those in verse, which may consist of parts of words (e.g. a g<sup>e</sup>n|tle s<sup>u</sup>n|shine, b<sup>l</sup>ess|ing w<sup>i</sup>n|ter), are made up of one or more whole words. There are many varieties of these units, and most of them are to be found in a sentence which he cites from Coleridge: 'Whát | is Gréece | at this pr<sup>e</sup>sent | móment | ? It is the country | of the héroes | from Códrus | to Philopo<sup>e</sup>men | ; and só | it wóuld be | , though ál | the sánds | of África | should c<sup>o</sup>ver | its c<sup>o</sup>rnfields | and ólive-gárdens | , and not a flówer | were léft | on Hymettus | for a b<sup>e</sup>e | to murmur in.'

Few attentive readers even are normally conscious of these units, partly perhaps because a slight and unusual pause is needed to make them perceptible; and fewer still perhaps could give them one and all their proper names. Here, too, a slight change of emphasis will convert some of the groups into verse-rhythms: 'Whát is | Gréece at | this present | móment'; 'though ál | the sánds | of África || should | c<sup>o</sup>ver its | c<sup>o</sup>rnfields'; 'and not | a flówer were | léft'. There are four orders of prose rhythm: rising rhythm, falling rhythm, waved rhythm, and level rhythm, types which 'differ much in *frequency*, *import*, and *emphasis*'. Every prose writer has his favourite variations, which, again, are 'not introduced wantonly, or for the mere ends of convenience, but in correspondence with some transition, in the nature of the imagery or passion.'

In addition to the foot units, there are certain classical *cursus* or cadences—sequences, that is, of two or three feet. These commonly occur in good English prose not at fixed intervals but in emphatic places; or they precede a pause. They bring 'the metrical principle into prose'. And there are four or five varieties of them. Professor Elton takes his examples from De Quincey: (a) s<sup>e</sup>r<sup>v</sup>ants d<sup>e</sup>p<sup>a</sup>r<sup>t</sup>ed, or, t<sup>o</sup>ssing in angu<sup>i</sup>sh; (b) b<sup>r</sup>igh<sup>t</sup>ness of thy r<sup>i</sup>sing; (c) h<sup>i</sup>nt from the

lī<sup>˘</sup>tā<sup>˘</sup>nŷ, or, sū<sup>˘</sup>m<sup>˘</sup>m<sup>˘</sup>i<sup>˘</sup>t<sup>˘</sup>s and dē<sup>˘</sup>clī<sup>˘</sup>vī<sup>˘</sup>tī<sup>˘</sup>es; and (d) clē<sup>˘</sup>a<sup>˘</sup>n ā<sup>˘</sup>mī<sup>˘</sup>d ā<sup>˘</sup>l  
the greenness. These classic cadences have long since taken  
root in English. But in addition there are many native *curſus*  
of several orders, which (and this might prove impracticable)  
have not yet been classified; such as, cō<sup>˘</sup>lū<sup>˘</sup>m<sup>˘</sup>n<sup>˘</sup>s ō<sup>˘</sup>f sō<sup>˘</sup>ū<sup>˘</sup>d;  
trā<sup>˘</sup>m<sup>˘</sup>p<sup>˘</sup>l<sup>˘</sup>e<sup>˘</sup>d ū<sup>˘</sup>pō<sup>˘</sup>n ē<sup>˘</sup>ā<sup>˘</sup>r<sup>˘</sup>t<sup>˘</sup>; vō<sup>˘</sup>i<sup>˘</sup>c<sup>˘</sup>es ō<sup>˘</sup>f the chō<sup>˘</sup>i<sup>˘</sup>r; strī<sup>˘</sup>f<sup>˘</sup>e ō<sup>˘</sup>f the vō<sup>˘</sup>cā<sup>˘</sup>l  
pā<sup>˘</sup>r<sup>˘</sup>t<sup>˘</sup>s. Others are not of two but of three units: ‘frā<sup>˘</sup>g<sup>˘</sup>m<sup>˘</sup>e<sup>˘</sup>nt or  
a hī<sup>˘</sup>n<sup>˘</sup>t ō<sup>˘</sup>f ſū<sup>˘</sup>ch a clō<sup>˘</sup>ū<sup>˘</sup>d’, ‘hē<sup>˘</sup> and hī<sup>˘</sup>s yō<sup>˘</sup>ū<sup>˘</sup>g chī<sup>˘</sup>l<sup>˘</sup>d<sup>˘</sup>r<sup>˘</sup>e<sup>˘</sup>n’, and so  
forth. These *curſus* and cadences cut across, as it were, the  
foot-units. In conclusion, Professor Elton points out that  
the difference between verse and prose depends not merely  
on the presence or absence of a regular recurrence of a system  
of feet. The modulations of verse are due to the attraction of  
prose rhythms, so that if we listen carefully, ‘we confusedly  
hear the two schemes together’. Similarly, the regular *curſus*  
and cadences of prose, ‘analogous to those of metre though  
not metrical’, in crossing the prose feet also produce a double  
rhythmical consciousness.

Briefly, our delight in either, if we pay it any close attention  
—and that may afford additional pleasure—is found to be of  
an inextricably complex description. ‘It is a gain to put names  
and numbers to something of which we already vaguely feel the  
beauty or the discord. Beauty is form, and number is a con-  
stituent of form, and “all things are determined by number”.’

In the course of his essay Professor Elton remarks that  
the ‘classical *curſus*, in particular, take us away from metre,  
because they do not enter into any known, or at least into  
any familiar metre, ancient or modern. So far they sustain  
the genius of prose.’ Nevertheless with a little patience we  
may persuade even these into a metre which, however crude  
it may be, may yet not appear to be wholly unfamiliar. E.g. :

Mistress-forsaken,  
‘Servants departed’,  
‘Tossing in anguish’,  
Lost, broken-hearted,  
Sadly I languish.

Or again:

Come, let us borrow a 'hint from the litany',  
Blest be our table with thyme, sage, and dittany.

And

'Summits and declivities'—  
Stark inhumanities—  
How compute the falls they cause, and  
Similar calamities?

And last, if it can be forgiven:

Lo, from the crystal waters—  
Not as yet fleeced into leanness—  
Ewes, with their sons and daughters,  
'Clean amid all the greenness'!

In their prose context, of course, cadences of this kind may be of a far more delicate use and pleasure: to wrench them, with a clumsy fingering, into metre may be only to ruin them.

All metrical, all verbal scansion, needless to say, is concerned with these elusive and protean phantom entities, called so unbeguilingly longs and shorts. They resemble the grin of the Cheshire cat, 'which remained some time after the rest of it had gone'. How long are they; how short? Of what kind of length or brevity? What distinguishes one from the other—pitch, intensity, duration, weight, or quality of sound, and so forth? Do they contain infinitesimal interstitial rests, pauses, silences? Is each of any kind equal in any sense to any other of its kind? What fraction of a long is equal to a short; or is the proportion to some extent mutable, and is this according to taste? And finally, what do we measure them with, and by?

We are apt to forget that since verse and a musical prose is intended to be read aloud, not only the ear is involved in these questions, but also, and no less pleasurably, the vocal organs. Are utterance and listening any *more* equivalent experiences, sensuously speaking, than are playing a fiddle and hearing it played, or singing and being sung to? Speech, too, again, not only resembles music, it is itself a kind

of music, its intervals being more minute than semi-tones, its phones less precisely measurable than notes, its accents usually far less emphatic. Any line moreover of verse, since in respect to its speech-tune and rhythm, and, maybe, meaning, it is an unprecise entity, may be read in different ways; provided that every such reading remains sensitively obedient *enough* to the underlying metre.

An intelligent child, if he is asked to read the words *lā lā lā*, will probably, making a minute pause between each, space the *lā*'s more or less equally, and then, if not before, he may inquire what the dots mean. They mean that the *lā*'s may be converted into,

*lā lā* | *lā lā* | *lā lā*

or

*lā lā* | *lā lā* | *lā lā*

or

*lā lā lā* | *lā lā lā* | *lā lā lā*

or

*lā lā lā* | *lā lā lā* | *lā lā lā*

or

*lā lā lā* | *lā lā lā* | *lā lā lā*

or

*lā lā* | *lā lā lā* | *lā*.

And whatever the vocal and aural difference between a *lā* and a *lā*, and whatever fraction of the former the latter may be, the additional *lā*'s will more or less approximately conform with the time (in spite of additional effort) spent in the pauses between his original trio. A ready tongue may venture farther—into a railway rhythm, *lā lā lā lā* | *lā lā lā lā*, or, *lā lā lā lā* | *lā lā lā lā*; or, *lā lā lā lā lā* | *lā lā lā lā lā*. And brief attention to the tappings of a clog dancer, and, beyond *his* skill even, to a patter-dancer, will reveal further possibilities—including syncopation. It is a question of physical skill—tongue *versus* foot. And if for *lā* we substitute, say, *stodg'th* ('*Stodg'th Ann* | *still o'er* | *her task'*); or,

storms (Storms vāst, vāst storms āll night)—we may envy the clogs.

The moment indeed we abandon our mere monotonous la-la-ing, muscular patterns, so to speak, of lips, tongue, pharynx, configurations of the vocal organs of an innumerable variety are at our disposal. And whether we ourselves make them, or merely listen to the sounds thus produced, these voice-patterns are a vital part of the effect of words upon our minds—and therefore of what they signify. In all fine verse as in prose they will differ one from another not only in quality, in tone, in the energy they require, but also in their service to the rhythms in question; just as in music a *rallentando* slows up the pace but does not change the time, a *crescendo* may increase the volume without affecting the pitch, and an air played on a clarinet which the composer intended to be sung, alters the timbre but not the tune. So, too, with the less severe restrictions proper to prose.

The term long, or short, then, resembles a box concerning which we may continue to dispute to our heart's content, even though its contents, as they affect both rhythm and metre, are of far more importance than the box itself. In 'The Douglas Tragedy', for example, instead of lā lā lā lā lā lā we have 'Come riding o'er the lea', 'And the sounder I will sleep', 'And put on your armour so bright', 'O whether will ye gang or bide?', 'Slowly they baith rade away', 'For this night my fair lady I've win', and even, 'And her father—hard—fighting—who—loved her so dear'. As unit-lines of verse, what these have in common, their metre, is as varyingly plain as it is essential. As fragments of poetic art and impulse, their differences—boxes *and* contents—in more, or less, apt mimetic accord with what they mean both intellectually and emotionally, are the touchstone of their success. 'Verse proves nothing', says Selden, far too easily, 'but the quantity of syllables; they are not meant for logic'; nor can rationality find a completely acceptable fold for these errant sheep. Only the word infinite seems to be capable of

including their potential variations, and only the pen of an angel could so expound the fascinating problems they present as to refrain from contradicting himself.

Prosody is to poetry, and, in a differing fashion, to fine prose also, what the old science of botany was to a plant and its flower. It is a method of classification. But botany, the botanist tells us, is now a branch of science with numerous twigs, including cytology, histology, pathology, ecology, and, above all, physiology—life processes. So with metrical poetry—rhythmical prose. We are also a little saddled with a literary ‘paleo-botany’—*fossil* metres, ‘quantity’ and so forth. And the one gift his fairy godmother would refrain from bestowing on a beloved and princely poet in his cradle (unless she were an evil fairy and, hoping against hope, intended to entice him into becoming a mere versifier) would be a wholly academic tome on prosody.

There is nature, and human nature; art, and science. But what doubt is there that Pherecydes as a child had mimicked his way into talking long before he discovered the phenomenon called prose? ‘There is only one school, the universe,’ said Landor, ‘one only schoolmistress, Nature.’ Lacking any native *art* either in prose or poetry, study of their science to a novice will be of little avail. Otherwise, it may be a generous aid. ‘He is a perpetual fountain of good sense; learned in all sciences’, was said by Dryden, not of a statesman or of an inspired pedagogue, but of a poet, Chaucer; but then *he* ‘must have been a man of a most wonderful comprehensive nature’. And good sense may grace even infancy.

A child aged four years and nine months recently heard a small boy explaining that he disliked mere snippets of bread and butter; he preferred it in slices—so wide, so thick. ‘And where,’ inquired their mother, ‘did you have them like that?’ ‘At Eton,’ was the reply. At which Miss Four-years-old with a shrewd and pensive glance interposed, ‘Were they *eaten*?’ It was her first pun, she was radiant, and at once inquired if there were any other words that could be similarly juggled with. She then asked the difference

between *shell* and *shall*, having detected that her Nannie preferred, as we most of us do, the former in such phrases as, 'I shell [or sh'll] be along presently.'

At the age of four years and eight months Charles Kingsley composed a scrap of verse, entitled 'Night':

When the dark forest glides along,  
When midnight's gloom makes everybody still,  
The owl flies out,  
And the bat stretches his wing;  
The lion roars;  
The wolf and the tiger prowl about,  
And the hyena cries.

Only a close examination will reveal how many delicate technical devices have been inwoven in these few lines—with their telling assonances, their economy of direct rhyme. A pleasure in sounds, an interest in words must have been instinctive in both these children, and certainly neither of them had been *taught* how to pun, how to suit speech rhythms and inflexions to sense, or how to visualize hyenas.

'All verse', in brief, in the words of Robert Bridges, 'derives its beauty mainly from its speech rhythms, but these are not the prosody, they are the rhythms which are allowed and ordered by the prosody.'

Since the utterance of any line of verse, like that of any fragment of speech, takes up a certain quantity of time and involves certain accents and stresses, metrical units have frequently been compared with those of music. Here, again, authorities ardently disagree. Following Sidney Lanier, for example, and in some little disaccord with Professor Elton and Professor Saintsbury, Dr. D. S. MacColl, in his essay on *Rhythm in English Verse, Prose and Speech*, makes use of a musical notation for scansion purposes. Very briefly his conclusion is: '*the foot, i.e. the unresolved bar, is characteristic of verse; the freely resolved bar, of prose.*'

What, then, and not only in regard to scansion, is the relation between words as they are adapted to verse (or prose) and words as they are put to the service of music? There are

several ways of using the human voice: whispering, speaking (reading and reciting), intoning, chanting, singing (and recitative). They differ in their method, intention, purpose, and effect; but being vocal and audible, each of them in its own degree cannot but be connected with music. Normal speech has a varied pattern: rhythm, melody, harmonics, meaning, and emotion; so has an air played on a flute; but clearly not all these to the same extent. Symphonic music, too, resembles a progressive and designed prose, or verse, in being balanced, coherent, sequential, conclusive; but the two latter are more directly concerned with ideas and with truth. If music *per se* is, as it is said to be, a purer art than that of prose or verse, it needs no words to enrich it. But spoken prose or verse may have its delicate music also—an incantation, whatever else that is valuable may be added to it. They, too, then may be the better alone. A musical setting, we may assume, should at any rate echo the sense and feeling in the words it uses, however much it may diversify and amplify them. The closer it keeps to the spoken inflections, the truer that echo; although—owing to the fact that in speech the intervals of intonation are frequently less than semitones, and that the differences in duration between one syllable, long or short, and another, are less exact than in music—a precise equivalent is impossible. To every musical setting of words, moreover, time is *beaten*; it would be nothing short of barbarous to beat time to the saying of its words.

It might be expected [says Mr. Fox Strangways] . . . that the rise and fall of tones would exactly coincide with the rise and fall of words, just as, in life, feeling often synchronizes exactly with thought. Certainly, there are plenty of instances of this, we can all think of places where the sound is a complete echo to the sense. . .

Nevertheless the approach cannot be more than approximate, and the 'places' themselves are exceptional.

On the other hand, an accompaniment was never solely an 'adjunct to a song'. Nowadays it 'tends more and more to carry the emotion, and to make the voice the mere vehicle of the words. The centre of gravity has been shifting rapidly



in this direction of late, and the song has become a piano-forte composition with voice *obbligato*.' Nevertheless no fine poem needs any such adjunct, or is unable to carry all the emotion it subserves.

The poet, says Mr. Fox Strangways again, 'does not value his subject as such, nor his structure as such, but that subject *in* that structure; and for anyone to concentrate on subject to the exclusion of structure (or the other way, if it were so) seems to him to be misreading the poem'. He demonstrates, however, that the poet in the act of composition was doing much the same thing. That poets have so seldom written even their 'songs' expressly for, and to, music suggests that they are well content to leave them to their own unaided devices, however gladly in the event they may welcome the musician.

It might be assumed none the less that we should lose at least half our pleasure and interest in a song if the words to which it has been set are omitted, and vice versa. On the contrary, in spite of some loss the actual sacrifice may be far less, and in certain respects there may be a gain. A song sung in an unintelligible language, or without any words at all—the voice purely an instrument, and particularly if that voice is a boy's and he was taught to sing, as Tobit may well have been, by an angel—*that* may be even the more ravishing. We can listen to such a song, or ourselves sing *and* listen to it, with an undivided attention. Indeed we do not necessarily double our pleasure by doubling its means. To some tastes silent films are preferable to the talkies, and we prefer our pictures 'unaccompanied'. As to opera, which quadruples the means, here too let discord cease:

If Musique and sweet Poetrie agree,  
As they must needs (the Sister and the Brother),  
Then must the Love be great, twixt thee and me,  
Because thou lov'st the one, and I the other. . . .

In a recent address on 'Rhythm in Verse and Song' Mr. Plunket Greene declares: 'It has taken us centuries—in spite of Schubert—to learn the lesson that the object of

singing is to make words more beautiful . . . ' by 'the addition of music'—it is the *words* of a song, that is, which are paramount. The poet, composer, and singer, he continues, 'have to reconcile the irreconcilable'. They 'have the same common ancestor—Speech. . . But . . . the fundamental beauties of music are directly opposed to the values of speech. . . And yet those of you who remember Sarah Bernhardt, Duse, Ellen Terry, Mrs. Patrick Campbell, or Dame Madge Kendal in their prime, will realize when I recall it to you, that in those moments when they had to deal with beauty—they *sang* their words.' 'The essence of singing'—in the usual sense—'is melodic *sostenuto* or sustained sound, and, as such, would seem to be the deadly enemy of speech. . . The very stressings and inflections of the words are altered—almost invariably for the worse—by the rules of musical phrasing.' The poet's rhythm is, or at least should be, 'subtle', '*ours* [the singer's] is obvious—so obvious as to be irresistible'.

He refers to other differences between song and speech: the irrational repetition of phrases or words, for example; and the putting of two or more notes to a single syllable—a device which in verse would instantly clear away all metrical difficulties:

There was a man upon a horse  
Sat upright in the air,  
And chi-i-ildren should of course  
Sit so-o on a chair.

So with

What makes the world so fair  
Ro-o-bi-in A-a-dair.

And lines 6 and 7 of the National Anthem:

Long too-oo rei-eign over us,  
Go-o-od save the King.

In many other old and hallowed favourites, moreover, precisely the same air or melody is made to suffice for stanzas which widely differ one from another in theme, mood, and feeling.

In the musical setting of a lyric, too, we expect and may

be aided by such directions from the composer as *pp*, *fff*, *appassionato*, *staccato*, *con amore*. Even the hardened elocutionist, however, would prefer a mere *cappriccio* when intent on reciting the words alone. The choice so far as a poem is concerned (and what precise help metre and rhyme are to the composer is for him to decide) lies between a spoken rendering; one only listened to; a musical setting, whether simple or otherwise, such as the Elizabethan lutanists and virginalists knew well; songs such as Schubert delighted in; the 'ballad' of modern times—restrained, expressive, associational, or ornate, the singer rather than the words its chief incentive; and the most recent invention referred to by Mr. Fox Strangways. There are beautiful examples of the last three varieties, and the singing voice can be a miracle of ease, delight, and sweetness; and yet most *poets*—it may be hazarded—would prefer the first two.

For final example, we may take not the setting of a lyric, but a chorus by Handel, its words in prose. He found for his purpose two verses in the first chapter of the first Book of Kings: 'And Zadok the priest took an horn of oil out of the tabernacle and anointed Solomon. And they blew the trumpet; and all the people said, God save King Solomon'; and, 'And Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet have anointed the king in Gihon.' Handel summarized them thus: 'Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet anointed Solomon King. And all the people rejoiced, and said, God save the King! Long live the King! May the King live for ever, Amen, Allelujah.' As a fragment of prose, the first ten words of this summary may be read:

- (a) Zádok | the p'riest | and Náthan | the próphet | anointed |  
Solomon | Kíng

and as verse:

- (b) Zádok the | p'riest and | Náthan the | próphet a | nointed |  
Solomon | Kíng.

or

- (c) These are the words, to my  
 Infinite profit, in  
 Youth, I was taught to  
 Sing:  
 'Zadok the priest, and  
 Nathan the prophet a-  
 nointed Solomon  
 King.'

or

- (d) These are the words,  
 To my infinite profit,  
 In youth I was taught  
 To sing:  
 'Zadok the priest,  
 And Nathan the prophet  
 Anointed Solomon—  
 King.

Of these, (b) sadly bereaves the fragment of dignity, (c) is a cantering horror that, so read, all but deprives it of sense, (d) is tinged with a little more feeling and perhaps keeps closest to (a) which is a simple prose statement and in every respect, including intonation and rhythm, the best.

Handel's setting is in common time—four beats and two accents. Many of the notes are sustained. The following fractions denote the duration of each verbal unit, the vertical lines being the bars:  $\overset{2}{Z}a \overset{1}{d}ok \overset{1}{t}he | \overset{2}{p}riest, \overset{1}{a}nd | \overset{2}{N}athan \overset{1}{t}he | \overset{2}{p}rophe\overset{1}{t}, a | \overset{2}{n}ointed | \overset{2}{S}olomon | \overset{4}{K}ing. This is followed by a chorus in triple time, containing 12 *rejoic'd's*, and that by one, in common time, containing 32 *Amen's* and 18 *Allelujah's*. Handel makes no distinction between the narrative of the first few words, and what the people 'said'. The choruses, being his, are nobly and splendidly sonorous—a tissue of gold and scarlet—befitting their occasion, and manifesting the same emotion, a ceremonious joy and jubilation. So, however, keeping strictly to the time, to speak or to intone or even to chant the words would be ruinous and absurd.$

But to return, after this long digression, to the rhythms of prose and verse only.

'I invite the reader', writes Dr. MacColl, summarizing his essay, 'to regard Prose and Verse not as sharply-divided entities under separate laws of rhythm, but as, in their characteristic forms, the extremities of a continuous chain, the variation being from freedom of syllable and emphasis towards strictness of foot and metrical pattern.' And between these two extremes, Characteristic Prose and Characteristic Verse, he places, first, Numerous Prose, and next, Verse invaded by Prose emphasis.

Coventry Patmore yet further simplifies the crucial but rudimentary distinction between prose and verse, in an enthusiastic paper on Alice Meynell's Essays:

... The simplest iambic foot of two syllables and one accent is religiously kept to in Mrs. Meynell's Essays, and she never falls into the artistic error, which nearly all other great writers sometimes commit, of changing the unequalled grace of her *walk* into a passage of *dance*; for that is the exact difference between prose, of which the unit is the iambic *foot*, and verse, of which the lowest division is the *metre*, of *two* feet. There are many excellent writers who, like Newman, have adhered strictly to the rule of prose; but such writers have never given, or even perhaps aimed at giving, to prose the greatest artistic beauty, by evoking its proper music, while obeying its primary law. Rare as the most excellent poetry is, the most excellent prose is yet rarer.

This is a statement made not only by a fine poet concerning another, but by a sedulous and masterly craftsman. Yet even he, so easily is attention eluded, failed to detect in it two distinct drifts of the metrical in its last two dozen words. First, 'by evō | king its prō | pēr mūsic, | while obēy | ing its prī | mārý law'; and next—in a cantering measure which, I feel certain, Patmore never deigned himself to use, and of which at the moment he can certainly not have been conscious:

[Ladies as lovely there are as my Liz,  
But for beauty of mind she's far fairer.]  
'Rare ás the most excellent poetry is,  
The most excellent prose is yet rarer'.

Stevenson far from fairly anathematized words as *bricks*. And when memory, as it sometimes may, refuses a writer its verbal riches, uncommonly refractory bricks they may remain. But *the* word, the *one* word, is the elusive hare. Unless, like William Cowper's, it comes at call, it must needs be hunted. 'I hate', says Landor, 'false words, and seek with care, difficulty, and moroseness those that fit the thing.' Words, yet again, in good prose must *not* fit into any recognizable metre. When fortune smiles, however, the English language is so supple and plastic, that if we are not intent on detecting such little unintentional trespassings into verse as those cited above, we wholly fail to notice them. Needless to say, a severe and unadorned prose is an extremely difficult discipline for a lively spirit. To achieve it, he must so master the contents of his mind that he shall be able to express them in a way which he dictates to himself—with complete coherence, to a certain definite end, with a view to convincing his readers—and therefore proceeding step by step from A to Z. On the other hand, one of the most guilefully persuasive and natural-seeming kinds of prose is that which is perpetually evading, and only just evading, the peril of quietly tumbling into metre. The problem is by a mere hair's breadth to escape doing so. The horse led to the water must not be allowed to stoop and drink. An underlying metre, whether of thought, progression, or verbal technique, may, like the 'laws' of Nature, be continually in operation; but a vigilant *art* conceals its presence. Whereas in verse the subtlest art consists in revealing the widest freedom within certain accepted restrictions—those of metre.

Thus far, in their rhythms, prose and verse approximate one to the other. But a prose that becomes metrical resembles a verse that cannot be scanned. Nor is this a mere error in craftsmanship. Why? Is it not because it has challenged a higher standard—not that of mere verse—but of *poetry* in verse? This, as prose, it cannot fully achieve. Let the writer print such little oversights as verse, however, and by adding inverted commas, originate, like the Irishman, his own

quotations, then his readers will judge them as verse, and he may triumph. We are apt to assume that prose offers an easy and unlimited liberty; but how far this is from the truth! None the less, the metrical is its one technical forbiddance. If into that it falters, it degenerates, as Patmore says, into verse, though it may in so doing mount higher into the poetic. If the prose thus far in error persists in that error, it changes its name and becomes verse; it both discards and claims a certain status. So, when a woman marries, she too changes her name, and both discards and claims a certain status. She is no longer a spinster but in name, at least, a wife. A prosaic mind when it ventures into verse only the more openly announces how prosaic a mind it is. A poetic mind, on the other hand, except of set intent, cannot surely by merely refraining from metre cast off its own very nature. It is that *kind* of mind—with the defects perhaps incident to its innate gifts—through and through.

When, then, prose lapses into the metrical the secession cannot but imply, we must assume, some minute change of matter—the addition of some quality or qualities which *in excelsis* are only to be found in the *finest* poetry. If the change is warranted, that is, not only has the responsible mind in some degree varied its orientation, but, in a like degree, poetry has crept in. Before venturing farther, then, we can hardly evade some faltering attempt to define the word.

What is poetry? A completely satisfying answer to this simple question seems to be as forlorn a hope as the lover's intent on instilling into words his 'impossible she'. How far is poetry a virtual or a personal matter, and how far one of changing modes, tastes, intentions, ideals? To what extent are the sounds of fine poetry, like those of music, its essential self; and all else that is involved in it only invaluable addenda? Is 'poetry' no more than a pure abstraction; and if so, should not our quest be confined solely to exemplary poems? Would even the poets themselves agree to any common aim, method, aspirations, motives? It seems,

indeed, an astonishing futility that one should be unable to supply a definition of what has been the unfailing delight and animation of a lifetime. Yet, as with beauty, happiness, wisdom, innocence, grace—so too with poetry; we may have a vague yet sufficing conception which has been derived from a lifelong experience in the reading of it. It is a conception that has been distilled from a myriad examples, and yet, like the essence of all essences from innumerable flowers, which is itself, I have heard, odourless, it may elude analysis. We may, that is, be fully aware of what we mean by the word, and yet be incapable of expressing that meaning. Few definitions in fact have proved to be of much real service. Few too exclude, apart from technique, an imaginative prose. There is a recurrent confusion between (*a*) the formless, rapid, multitudinous, volatile mind-stuff—however precise its nucleus—which the poet endeavours to convey by means of words; (*b*) the words themselves, as he is ill or well content to leave them, awaiting transmutation, revival; and (*c*) the effect they produce on their reader, an effect that will vary, of course, with every individual reader and even at different readings. It is clearly out of the question that any (*c*) should more than approximate to its (*a*).

On the one hand, a purely intellectual search for a definition may be vitally hindered by lack of experience in the conditions and processes that go to its making. On the other, a poet is apt to cherish an ideal of poesy, to which he is continually aspiring, even if he never attain it. Definitions range from the touchingly simple to the uselessly abstruse.

'I wish', said Coleridge, 'our clever young poets would remember my homely definitions of prose and poetry; that is, prose—words in their best order;—poetry, the *best* words in the best order.' Proper words, however, in their proper order was Coleridge's original definition of prose—a moderation that hardly sufficed for Flaubert, Walter Pater, Stevenson, or Henry James! Nothing short of the best can be good enough, either in a fine prose or verse; and in neither should that best be too salient, but only uninterchangeable.



Not that a poetic vocabulary may not be markedly original—Skelton, Donne, Gerard Hopkins, Thomas Hardy, Charles Doughty, T. S. Eliot. Their 'best' is *their* best; and so with the greatest and the least. Poetry again has been defined as memorable speech, and as a criticism of life: but sheer doggerel may be memorable, and Paley's *Evidences of Christianity* and Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* are little if they are not such a criticism.

Similarly, Wordsworth's familiar statement that 'poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings', and 'takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity', applies admirably to his own poetry at its best and purest. Passionate beyond the conception of poetic natures less profound than his own, the remembered emotion may have been; and this, as he acknowledged, was the state of mind—serene and pleasurable—in which he himself composed. But can we assume it to have been Robert Herrick's state of mind, when, exquisite lens in eye, he seated himself at his lapidary's bench? Intent on consummately refining the setting of some image, event, fancy in his imagination which was beguilingly vital and beautiful to him (and, in his less noble numbers, extremely nauseous) he seems—apart, that is, from such a poem as his 'Litany'—to have been moved by no emotion more impassioned and acute than the true craftsman's zest in that on which he is spending his dearest skill. Nor do many of Edgar Allan Poe's mesmeric lyrics appear to have been the wholly *spontaneous* overflow of powerful feelings. To some tastes, even the best of them are no more than the outcome of a sensuous or even 'morbid' emotionalism. And 'The Bells', far from being spontaneous, was expanded from a few lines written to please a friend into the campanological little *tour de force* we may know too well. The common notion, indeed, that poetry is evolved with ease in a fine frenzy hardly accounts for its extreme rarity.

It might be an aid to its definition, perhaps, to define the word poet. But *his* 'name is Legion', as said the man who was possessed; and it is he whom jesting Theseus, not without

the connivance of a self-scanned Shakespeare, consigned to a cell shared by the lunatic and the lover. Compare the English poets one with another, they appear to be no less diverse in everything, except in being poets, than any other isolated company of men. Moreover, as Keats, also looking inward, discovered, the poet is of all men the least poetic. And 'to judge of poets is only the faculty of poets, and not of all poets, but the best'. On honey-dew this chameleon may have fed, and drunk the milk of paradise; yet his mind in the act of creation probably resembles the interior of a hive of bees on the point of swarming—in pursuit of a queen whose name only the Muses themselves could disclose, and which Solomon kept secret.

All art is learned by art, this art alone  
It is a heavenly gift. . .

To those who value it, the one thing certain is that poetry, like wisdom, is a singularly rare thing, that the price of it is above rubies, and that it cannot be gotten for gold. Once given potential life in words, it need never die; an ardent delight in it, and of this, too, there are many degrees, may be not only the joy of childhood, but a supreme and inexhaustible solace to the aged. So long as we ourselves remain faithful, *it* will never prove false.

Yet even though strict definition may be impracticable, we can at least attempt to summarize the impressions made on us in the reading of poetry.

In form and expression it is condensed but not congested; it is complex rather than complicated; and even if it be incidentally obscure—by reason of its construction, its references, or its profundity—it is never finally unintelligible. What it tells, while it may be pellucidly clear, is yet deep; it is rational, and yet lies beyond the arbitration of pure reason; and not only will the closest of paraphrases rob it of some vital virtue, but even though it is replete with sense it may be ruined by imposing upon it any detachable and extrinsic meaning. It is lit with beauty, though beauty was not its aim. We know this beauty to

be present, but could not prove it to be present. We can scarcely say which entrances us most, the melody it sings or how it sings it; its formal vessel or the nectar it contains; the course it follows or the goal it arrives at. And last, although we may delight in it as naturally as we delight in water to drink, colours to feast the eye on, ideas to ponder, music to hear, human emotions to share, and to tread that region of the imagination to which it admits us; yet its secret, its very self, while it has won in to the aware and engrossed company of our inmost being, has still in some degree eluded us.

Statements such as these, of course, are only partial and imperfect descriptions of poetry, not a definition. They are like the specification of an invention unaided by a working model. Ideals may widely differ, the only conclusive revelation of poetry is a fine poem. And to exhaust that of its secrets resembles a child's attempt to empty the sea with his sand-pail. In search of an example I opened an anthology at random and chanced on 'A Sonnet of the Moon'. It was a happy chance, as this is a poem almost *in vacuo*, the work of Charles Best, a writer of whom we know nothing except that he was living in 1602, and contributed to an anthology of his day. We cannot then be led astray by the 'personal'.

Look how the pale Queen of the silent night  
Doth cause the ocean to attend upon her,  
And he, as long as she is in his sight,  
With his full tide is ready her to honour:

But when the silver waggon of the Moon  
Is mounted up so high he cannot follow,  
The sea calls home his crystal waves to moan,  
And with low ebb doth manifest his sorrow.

So you, that are the sovereign of my heart,  
Have all my joys attending on your will,  
My joys low-ebbing when you do depart,  
When you return, their tide my heart doth fill.

So as you come, and as you do depart,  
Joys ebb and flow within my tender heart.

Apart from its faulty rhyming, which may easily pass unnoticed, the first thing apparent in this 'Sonnet' is its directness and economy of statement. Although it was written three centuries ago, it yet contains not a single word that might not be used nowadays in ordinary conversation. There is scarcely a rhythm—there are few lines even—to be found in it, aptly delicate though every one of them is, which might not occur in a rather romantic prose, and even in talk: e.g. Oh, look at the pale moon in the silent night, Mamma; or, Look, Mother, William's kite 'is mounted up so high mine cannot follow'; or, 'So our heroine decides to entice him on, "and he, as long as she is in his sight", continues to follow her'. But with how spontaneous a felicity these prose-rhythms are interwoven into the metrical scheme.

There is nothing irrational in the poem, nothing needlessly complicated. It is natural, its meaning is transparent, the objects it refers to, ocean, silver waggon, crystal waves, and even she to whom it is addressed are true and lovely in their kind. It is a delight to say and to hear, and as tranquilly lucent in effect as the pale queen herself. Nevertheless its strands of meaning are many, and inextricably intertwined. It is condensed. The participants in its mystery, the moon and her tides, sovereignty and its courtiers, enwreath their mysteries one within the other in the service of the two lovers, to produce at last a profound trinity in unity, a unity in trinity. And when the idea-design and the verbal pattern are completed—the conception come to birth—there follows that tender, artless couplet for postscript; so artless that the poet is content to use two of his rhymes over again! One might as justly belaud a daisy for its 'innocence' as tax this sonnet with a moral *intention*. Nevertheless by comparison with its serene yet impassioned outlook, and with the relation between the lovers—body, mind, and spirit—of whom it tells, many of our modern psycho-analysing 'sex' novels take on the appearance of human styes—and roofed in at that.

A poem no less simple at a first reading is this by Mr.

Robert Frost, the rhythms of which, I believe, are intentionally those of daily talk:

I have wished a bird would fly away  
And not sing by my house all day;

Have clapped my hands at him from the door  
When it seemed as if I could bear no more.

The fault may partly have been in me,  
The bird was not to blame for his key.

And of course there must be something wrong  
In wanting to silence any song.

The effect of this poem resembles that of the wind's faint ripples on the surface of some dark quiet lake in the hills, intimating its depth and its source, and just ruffling its reflections. One could hardly believe that a common little gate like 'of course' could admit us into so wide a range of contemplation. In this it shares one of the secrets of William Blake.

Reiteratedly in a fine poem this peculiar condensation of 'meaning'—reference, inference, and effect—is revealed. It reminds us of the drowning ship-boy in the ballad, who with his auger 'bored holes two at twice'. What occasions any such pregnant piece of writing is another matter. Anything that is meant by inspiration apart, it seems to proceed from a condition of consciousness compounded in some degree of both dream and wake. It is a state intensely aware yet contemplative, unforeseen, infrequent, temporary, and in much all but inscrutable. Such metaphors as flash-point, fusion-point, spontaneous combustion, the solitary spot where three roads meet, an island that is the peak of a submarine mountain, clumsy and inadequate though they may be, come into the fancy.

The more 'rapt' the imaginative state of mind, the more effortlessly it will brim its minute verbal phials with a various attar. But so delicately is this secured that even one substituted word can momentarily imperil its influence on the reader. For crude example, we can conceive perhaps the

various states and degrees as it were of creativeness between such a prose passage as: 'There are two distinct orders of preacher within every presbytery—the ardent and elegant, the substantive and profound. They may be compared to two of our own famous and diverse rivers. I hear, as it were, the *genius loci* of the one addressing that of the other: "Wherefore is it, my friend, that *your* current flows so tranquilly and quietly?" Whereto the other replies, "Quietly forsooth! That very well may be. Rapid your stream certainly is, and mine sluggish; nevertheless for every human being whom with the truth *you* overwhelm in your waters, I myself dispose of two"'—we can compare that little disquisition with a lyric, brief, sinister, a minute masterpiece, only the more condensed for the Southerner by its unfamiliar *rin* and *gar*:

Quo' the Tweed to the Till,  
     'What gars ye gang sae still?'  
 Quo' the Till to the Tweed,  
     'Though ye rin wi' speed,  
 And I rin slaw,  
 For ilka ane that ye droon,  
     I droon twa.'

But then, is not prose also fully capable of a fine, pregnant, rational, and imaginative condensation, comparable with that of verse? Here is the wild and wilful Thomas Nash on 'The Divine Aretine': 'It was one of the wittiest knaves that ever God made. If out of so base a thing as ink there may be extracted a spirit, he writes with nought but the spirit of ink, and his style was the spirituality of art's, and nothing else, whereas all others of his age were but the lay temporality of inkhorn terms. . . No leaf he wrote on but was like a burning glass to set on fire all his readers. . .' On the very verge of verse, here and there, this passage is also on the verge of the poetic; and, in its own kind, it would take a rare poet to better it.

And here (again at random) is Mr. By-ends—the genteel nephew of Parson Two-tongues, and the husband of Lady

Faining's daughter—now the complete gentleman, even if his great-grandfather was nought 'but a waterman, looking one way, and rowing another'. He is addressing Christian: 'Tis true we somewhat differ in religion from those of the stricter sort, yet but in two small points: First, we never strive against wind and tide. Secondly, we are always most zealous when religion goes in his silver slippers; we love much to walk with him in the street, if the sun shines, and the people applaud it.' With slippers, street, and sun of this order in his repertory, no poet surely would find himself far from home.

And, again, Ben Jonson, on style: 'For a man to write well, there are required three necessities—to read the best authors, observe the best speakers, and much exercise of his own style.' Brevity here is the winning soul of good sense—but it is rational rather than imaginative condensation. Presently, after counselling extreme care in seeking the best, in avoiding 'froward conceits', and submitting all to judgement and order, Jonson continues:

Repeat often what we have formerly written; which beside that it helps the consequence, and makes the juncture better, it quickens the heat of imagination, that often cools in the time of setting down, and gives it new strength, as if it grew lustier by the going back; as we see in the contention of leaping, they jump farthest that fetch their race largest; or, as in throwing a dart or javelin, we force back our arms to make our loose the stronger. Yet, if we have a fair gale of wind, I forbid not the steering out of our sail, so the favour of the gale deceive us not. For all that we invent doth please us in conception of birth, else we would never set it down.

Not only is the imagery telling, it is creative; it knits together the meaning and then intensifies into the poetic with that vanishing glimpse of the solitary in his sailing skiff, skimming in the favour of the 'gale' over the sunny lustre of the sea.

So also in simple things. John Gerarde's *Herball*, first published in 1597, consists for the most part merely of descriptions of flowers and plants and of their properties. Yet even here, in the melody and precision of the language, in

the apt infrequent image, in the realization thus conveyed (almost hallucinatory at moments and far exceeding in this the charming woodcuts in his book) of the actual living thing described, the poetic creeps in:

The Indian Sun, or the golden floure of Peru . . . is . . . like to the Camomil floure[. It is] beset round about with a pale or border of goodly yellow leaves, in shape like the leaves of the floures of white Lillies: the middle part whereof is made as it were of unshorn velvet, or some curious cloath wrought with the needle: which brave worke, if you do thorowly view and marke well, it seemeth to be an innumerable sort of small floures, resembling the nose or nosle of a candlestick broken from the foot thereof; from which a small nosle sweats forth excellent fine and cleare turpentine, in sight, substance, favor, and tast. . .

or this, of the Cedar Tree:

The timber is extreame hard, and rotteth not, nor waxeth old; there is no wormes nor rottennesse can hurt or take the hard matter or heart of this wood, which is very odoriferous and somewhat red. *Solomon* King of the Iewes did therefore build Gods Temple in Ierusalem of Cedar wood. The Gentiles were wont to make their Divels or Images of this kinde of wood, that they might last the longer.

And this, of sleepy or deadly nightshade, or dwale:

Dwale or sleeping Nightshade hath round blackish stalkes six foot high, whereupon do grow great broad leaves of a dark green colour; among which grow smal hollow floures bel-fashion, of an overworn purple colour; in the place whereof come forth great round berries of the bignesse of the black chery, green at the first, but when they be ripe of the colour of black jet or burnished horne. . .

The greene leaves of deadly Nightshade may with great advice be used in such cases as Pettimorell; but if you will follow my counsell, deale not with the same in any case, and banish it from your gardens and the use of it also, being a plant so furious and deadly: for it bringeth such as have eaten thereof into a dead sleepe wherein many have died. . . To give you an example hereof it shall not be amisse: It came to passe that three boies of Wisbich in the Isle of Ely did eate of the pleasant and beautifull fruit hereof, two whereof died in lesse than eight houres after that they had eaten of them. The third child had a quantitie of honey and water mixed together given him to drinke, causing him to vomit often: God blessed this



meanes and the child recovered. Banish therefore these pernicious plants out of your gardens, and all places neere to your houses, where children or women with child do resort, which do oftentimes long and lust after things most vile and filthie; and much more after a berry of a bright shining blacke colour, and of such great beautie, as it were able to allure any such to eate thereof.

Since, as in Charles Best's sonnet, no word here is a mere counter, each object mentioned is slightly heightened in effect—the three 'boies', the honey, the women with child; and *how* vile and filthy is its 'vile and filthie'. Indeed, the dangerous berries themselves are made the more alluring: Gerarde with his art has silvered his poisonous pills. Even from the reading of a prose simple and dutiful as this, may we not derive, if faintly, those odd and pleasing symptoms in skin and diaphragm which Professor Housman discovered to be convincing evidence that poetry is present? For mind and body are in as close a collusion as that of fiddle and music. Nor will a wise man inquire too closely concerning exact cause, or even effect, provided only the latter triumph.

In the last resort, then, to define poetry or even the poetic seems to remain impracticable, if only because, like the quick-silver in a thermometer, it rises and falls by minute gradations according to the temperature of the reader's mind. 'Even the best of all poems are the best upon innumerable degrees.' We can do little more than characterize and exemplify this; a pleasant task enough, but fitful in success; and still more so, if we insist on rejecting prose.

While pondering one day, and as usual all but in vain, on this entrancing and perplexing problem, I happened to catch sight of a notice-board behind the spear-headed palisade of a chapel on which were inscribed these few words:

No one can come into Heaven by immediate mercy.

This, I fancy, was the translation of an apophthegm of Swedenborg's, and, as it seems to me, it is an example of what we are seeking—the transitional. It is a sentence in prose. And yet, though it falls short of poetry, is it not in the nature of poetry? How so? Because, surely, its mere

words in their onset at once fling open the gates of the mind; as do, 'Oh what can ail thee, knight at arms', or 'Mortality, behold and fear', or 'When love with unconfined wings', or 'Gane were but the winter cauld', or 'Now the day is over', or 'Here, a little child, I stand'. Like most poetry, that is, it at once sharply arrests attention. And this, though at first glance, I confess, it seemed to me to be untrue. Offhand I should have assumed that no one can come into Heaven *except* by immediate mercy. However that may be, we may welcome poetry as poetry without (quite apart from matter of fact) admitting it to be truth, unless it be that imaginative truth which is of a rare order and closely allied with beauty. Swedenborg's indeed is a statement which, as is so frequently the case with poetry, instantly and repeatedly runs counter to the merely expected and conventional. Word by word we encounter the unforeseen: no one *can* come into Heaven, rather than 'may'; can *come* into Heaven, rather than 'go'; come *into* Heaven, rather than 'to'. The phrase 'by immediate mercy' also is transparently clear and yet exceedingly condensed. It needs a prolonged exploration. And last, the sentence itself is poised on the very margin of the metrical:

And this my heart avows, that no one can

Come into Heaven by immediate mercy.

But, as with other fragments of poetic prose when they are forced into metre, the *significant* rhythm, that of the original, is now lost. Only a fine poet could metricalize the sentence without depriving it of an intrinsic grace, but he might also, perhaps, add his own.

But if even a brief sentence in prose may in technique and effect fall little short of metrical poetry, what is to be said of the two species of writing which openly claim the virtues of both: free verse and prose poetry?

Both phrases suggest contradictions in terms. No *verse*—imposed metre—any more than a dance made up of certain steps, patterns, and figures can be called free if it is bound by any law or principle, even though that law may be

indetectible and is not laid down. Free verse of its own nature resigns many of the rhythms and inflexions, infinite in variety, which are proper to good prose—itself a form that is obedient to many accepted yet unwritten rules. It may succeed in emphasizing significant pauses, but is also apt to isolate metrical fragments which in prose are effective only when they are not self-evident. At the same time it rejects the numerous traditional patterns and designs of metre and stanza. Its gains, then, cannot but be at a severe sacrifice. There are, of course, degrees of freedom as there are degrees of success in every form of art; and a certain novelty of technique is inevitable in any original work. No two leaves on any tree are facsimiles one of another. Even extreme innovations have merely to justify themselves. The process is first a forlorn hope, then a gradual wooing and winning over of opponents, the shedding of inorganic excesses, and a final digestion into the accepted and traditional. Free verse is not yet perhaps out of the balance.

Among the most generous tributes in literature are those which poets have paid one to another. Nevertheless, and whatever penalties the Muses may inflict on them for the treason, they can be intensely partisan. Some, like the capercailzie, sing best with their eyes shut—blind to all rivals. Others, like the raven (and even lesser birds) resent the presence of any interloper in the sacred territory. They resemble fervid patriots who in their zeal for the fatherland turn to and rend one another. Rival *isms* and schools out-feud the Capulets, heedless of the fact that even if craftsmanship may be in part learned, no art can be taught, and none to any fine purpose deliberately imitated—except perhaps for practice. Each generation in turn, moreover, is apt to fail in sympathy with that which precedes and which follows it. So also with aim and method. The new wine cannot even stand the strain of neighbouring the old bottles. But time passes, the new grows old, and the great English tradition, refreshed with innovations it can easily engulf, flows tranquilly on.

What at a casual reading may appear to be free verse is to be found in Coventry Patmore's odes in *The Unknown Eros*. A brief inspection at once reveals their severely metrical and alliterative basis, and that the lines are rhymed. This great artist could well claim a right to freedom; he used it to impose on himself more delicate restrictions and thus the more masterfully to triumph over them. That seems to have been Nature's wayward procedure in her long journey towards the anatomy of Man. Free verse is still in the nature of a novelty; a careful analysis of its technique made by Robert Bridges reveals its dangers.

Prose poetry, on the other hand, is a use of language discovered centuries before Euphuism and Lyly. It is *fine* writing *in excelsis*, and its most exotic bloom is referred to and derided as the purple patch, a phrase at least as remote as Horace. And though there appears to be no specific reference to it in *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, its author's views concerning it will be found scattered among his remarks on genteelisms, gallicisms, poeticisms, purisms, 'the tuppence coloured', the stylish, and elsewhere. The promising young can hardly avoid it, and only by extreme vigilance can its colour be finally banished from the ink even of the aged—whose fancy turns that way. Much depends upon the precise tint. At its worst, prose poetry attempts in respect to its matter what free verse attempts in respect to its form—to serve two masters. And it is usually faithless to one of them for the sake of little more than a pretence of fidelity to the other. It affects the appearance of the poetical at little expense of its spirit; and the fabric is hardly worth the decoration lavished upon it.

The want of any genuine impulse and energy makes it rhythmically nerveless and languid; it doesn't exactly sound sweet, it is euphonious. It mimicks what it cannot create, prefers any substitute for a 'spade', and tries hard to be beautiful. Its rare and precious words and objects are apt to be too precious, and suffer from their setting. The style smells of the lamp, and the oil is scented.

Still, whatever its defects may be, prose poetry is usually innocent enough in intention, springing perhaps from a misconception, from extreme sensitiveness or self-consciousness or vanity, and thence, pose, pretence, flattery. It may, too, be the fine flower of a genuine delight in the rich, ornate, exquisite, and lavish.

Self-consciousness indeed, even a tinge of the affected, when in moderation, may be a grace note in a prose or verse that manifestly intends it, even slightly parades it, for its own subtle purposes. Every art conceals artifice, and in this, finally, only a virgin naturalness of soul can fully succeed. There is a circuit, too, which original minds are apt to make in life—away from a first simplicity, and back to it again.

Wholly apart from the prose poetry which is indulged in for its own sweet sake alone, and without ulterior motives, there is a variety with wholly evident motives, vast in quantity, various in quality—an industry in itself. It is cajolery, not of its writer, but of its reader—a decoy, a bait. Its seemingly careless raptures are of the greatest service in extolling every conceivable kind of novelty, the 'latest' in anything, anywhere. It chiefly frequents the Woman's Page, but its dulcet persuasions haunt also the wine merchant's or house-agent's list and the company promoter's prospectus, the wooings of the tailor, of the purveyor of patent medicines, every seedsman's catalogue.

'Have you ever thought', murmurs the seducer, 'about the enormous amount of printed matter which is published in Britain every year? . . .'—not a little of it concerned with little feministicities like, 'Lady X is an adept in the charming art of hostess-craft, and gives a new angle of human interest to recipes that are commendable in themselves. There is the homely onion broth. . .' Like, 'Nowhere have I sensed a more welcome air of comfort than that which pervades afternoon tea rites in the drawing-rooms of country houses . . .' and the sheer lyricism of,

You could scarcely help being a siren in . . . It holds its shape—at the same time that it holds yours—oh, it's a joy to wear, it's so

flexible, so free, and yet so clinging that no lovely line is lost. It is lasting, too . . . smart, shiny, and what the French like to call 'sportive'.

But examples in this kind—Songs sung to the Sirens—are as the sands of the sea-shore for multitude. Nor is Man immune:

Sherry Wine is in every way a Wine suitable for all occasions. Pale amber in colour, with its attractive aroma of the 'flor', this sherry possesses the bouquet of a true fino. Light and gentle, it leaves the palate with a dry and refreshing finish. A wine that will not only quench the thirst and give an appetite, but will grace any sideboard.

Or this, for which even Jenny Wren might jilt her currants:

Rather distinctive of the Vintage which, on the 'nose', is exceedingly flattering and very pronounced, and on the palate the Wine is far drier than one is led to expect. Very fine luncheon Wine, as it can be served all through the meal; full and of excellent aroma. Showing quality.

Flowers of speech, again, for flowers from the nurseryman. Two peonies:

Very rich deep crimson or ruby-red, and the central stamens, which are flattened, are of the same tint, but each one is edged with gold, giving an 'effect of light' in the centre, somewhat baffling to describe. The whole forms a glowing mass of colour. Extra. Mid-season. Sold out. . .

Very beautiful. A fine form and most attractive colour; bright rich peach pink, and golden petaloids; it has a high centre of cream coloured short petals, with cockatoo crest of pink tipped with carmine; quite unique and very choice; mid-season to very late; extra.

The price, needless to say, follows suit.

Efforts of this kind may suffer from a divided attention—one eye on the object, the other on the customer. Compare them with the single-mindedness of Gerard's 'noisome weed', the chickweed, the bastard chickweed. It 'hath smal tender branches trailing upon the ground, beset with leaves like unto those of *Scordium* or Water Germander. Among which give forth little blew floures: which being faded there appear small flat husks or pouches, wherein lieth the seed.'

The relation of pure science to applied science resembles that between literature and the art of advertising. It needs for its perfection not only an acute insight into all kinds of human nature but all the talents—wit, humour, a mock naïvety, sinuosity, and an endless skill in the use of words. A dirgelike prose of the utmost candour at one extreme, the prettiest and daintiest flights of fancy at the other. Dickens delighted in it—so did Mr. Jasper Sapsea, the auctioneer; so did Autolycus:

‘... Had not the old man come in with a whoo-bub . . . and scared my choughs from the chaff, I had not left a purse alive in the whole army.’

How a mere arrangement of words enables us to see beyond its ostensible motives and intentions into the secret mind responsible for it is one of the enigmas of man’s soul. It can as subtly bewray the heart.

Why, my beloved, did you not come to me? Oh, beloved, are you ill? Come to me, sweet one. I waited and waited for you, but you came not. I shall wait again to-morrow night, same hour and arrangement. Do come, sweet love, my own dear love of a sweetheart. Come, beloved, and clasp me to your heart. Come, and we shall be happy. A kiss, fond love. Adieu, with tender embraces, ever believe me to be your own ever dear, fond Mini.

Here rings a palpable echo not only of the Song of Solomon but of all the impassioned love-letters that ever scorched note-paper. And the sentences hover—even haver—midway between prose and verse. The majority are all but metrical. Of thought it has little, of apparent emotion a good deal. But is that emotion real? Are these decoying rhythms genuine? Is there not a repeated note or cadence of falsity throughout, that juts suddenly into full view in the wholly prosaic, ‘same hour and arrangement’? This perhaps is being wise after the event; for the letter was written by Madeleine Smith a day or two before the death of the lover whom she was afterwards charged with poisoning.

As too sensuous, too emotional, or too fanciful a prose is

apt to be tinged with purple, so verse may be tinged with the puce. If, however, a really fine and forthright prose may legitimately again and again quietly flower into the poetic and in its own degree affect us as poetry does, does not, again, as fine a verse clearly reveal degrees of the poetic also? Does not indeed *every* fine poem thus proceed?—its substance of refined gold, and here and there a precious stone in as beautiful a setting; a continuous smouldering that again and again breaks into flame? And this, whether it is simple yet condensed, as in Wordsworth; three strands thick with involved meanings, as in Donne; tortuous and agonized, as in *Macbeth*; or, as in *Lear* or Lewis Carroll, iridescent with pure nonsense?

Are there not such gradations of the poetic even in 'The Ancient Mariner'? It is an acknowledged masterpiece of the purest imaginative genius. Only after a close scrutiny do we become aware to what degree. In Alice Meynell's words: 'It is more full of a certain quality of extreme poetry . . . the most single magic—than any other in our language.' Nevertheless, as she adds, 'the reader must be permitted to call the story silly'. Moreover, the poem is so far prosaic as to deliver at last a text and to preach a brief sermon: 'He prayeth best who loveth best All things both great and small.' But this particular text—which is, after all, one of the very few axioms in the poetic creed—appears to have been an afterthought, since the statement in the 'argument' of the poem—'How the Ancient Mariner cruelly and in contempt of the laws of hospitality killed a Sea-bird, and how he was followed by many and strange judgements'—was added two years after the poem first appeared, in 1789.

As for its onset:

It is an ancient mariner,  
And he stoppeth one of three.  
'By thy long grey beard and glittering eye,  
Now wherefore stopp'st thou me? . . .'

there could hardly be a more abrupt Sesame. Sinbad has doubled his part with Ali Baba's. What of the treatment



of its theme? Certain critics of its day greeted it with derision. And in his *Note-Books* Samuel Butler pilloried its title. A sonneteer himself, and perhaps for this reason, he declared that 'the highest poetry is ineffable'. 'The last thing a great poet will do in these days is to write verses', since 'versifying' is poetry's 'lowest form'—a paradox which he left naked and unashamed, but which, incidentally, is a telling if backhanded tribute to the medium of prose.

His quiz of Coleridge's masterpiece is that it 'would not have *taken* so well if it had been called "The Old Sailor", so that Wardour Street has its uses'. If a tinge of the archaic is the mark of Wardour Street the charge is true—in the spelling, in such words as *eft-soones* and so forth. But then the 'Rime' is dateless as well as timeless, and its greybeard loon, Butler notwithstanding, was neither intended to be nor is 'any old' sailor, any 'elderly naval man'—either of the Dibdin or *Treasure Island* or *Nancy Brig* order. He is Coleridge's 'Ancient Mariner', once young, vigorous and venturesome, delighting in his cross-bow; now for ever ineffably aged—a sailor whose destiny never was on any earthly sea or shore.

So little concern has he with ordinary human life that—unless I am mistaken—Coleridge tells us neither the name of his ship, nor the port from which she sailed and to which she tragically returned, nor the nature of her cargo. Her steersman is frequently mentioned, but neither her master nor any one of her officers. Nor is any member of her crew spoken of as going below. And would it have been by one iota the better poem if these data had been added to it—or the star within the crescent's nether tip placed well beyond it? One might as well assert that Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, which begins in a wildly entrancing romantic strain and lapses into a fantastic satire, is Wardour Street for Nowhere. In any case it is highly improbable that any *child* who has feasted his imagination on this matchless poem can have been led astray into such petty entanglements as these.

In spite, however, of its purity as poetry, the *Rime*

enshrines—as Professor Livingstone Lowes has revealed—a multitude of transfigured memories gleaned by Coleridge from scores of books written not in verse but in that plain, faithful, and evocative prose which is almost peculiar to writings in English concerned with the sea and its intrepid seamen, from the days of Noah on to Hakluyt, until our own. Coleridge had read, marked, and digested; but in that supremely poetic mind this last process, inscrutable transmutation, eventuated in this magical lyric. Its elements, that is, were chiefly borrowed; in essence it was solely his own. The poem is founded on facts originally based four-square on a prose foundation; while the palace it builds, that sunny dome, those caves of ice, resemble, as may an ideal architecture, ‘frozen music’.

Further yet. Pondering, it seems, on his poem fifteen years after he had completed its first draft—amplifying, refining, enriching, discarding as he went—Coleridge renewed his conception of his theme, and added (what are hardly less remarkable) marginal glosses in prose which at least suggest a motive—that of clarifying and enriching the poem without endangering its poetic effect. Here is a fragment:

In his loneliness and fixedness [the Mariner] yearneth towards the journeying Moon, and the stars that still sojourn, yet still move onward; and every where the blue sky belongs to them, and is their appointed rest, and their native country and their own natural homes, which they enter unannounced, as lords that are certainly expected and yet there is a silent joy at their arrival.

In this very unusual and sustained sentence of rhythmical prose we find, as we might well expect, fragments of metrical rhythm:

In his loneliness and fixedness he yearneth;

the haunting hesitant cadence of,

and is their appointed rest;

of,

There is a silent joy at their arrival.

Indeed, the whole tenor of the gloss is far nearer in kind the poem it annotates than what we commonly mean by prose. And what does it gloss? Sheer wizardry in words:

The moving Moon went up the sky,  
And no where did abide:  
Softly she was going up,  
And a star or two beside—

Her beams bemooked the sultry main,  
Like April hoar-frost spread;  
But where the ship's huge shadow lay  
The charmed water burnt alway  
A still and awful red.

Beyond the shadow of the ship,  
I watched the water-snakes;  
They moved in tracks of shining white,  
And when they reared, the elfish light  
Fell off in hoary flakes.

Within the shadow of the ship  
I watched their rich attire:  
Blue, glossy green, and velvet black,  
They coiled and swam; and every track  
Was a flash of golden fire. . . .

The metrical basis of each line in turn exquisitely hovers as it were beneath its rhythms, like the shadow of a kestrel poised in air. As for their mere longs and shorts, there is not only a continuous fractional variety of measure in every syllable, as there is an intertwining of image, statement, emotion in each line, but the quality, in some indefinable accord, of each several sound, as in fine prose, continually differs. Nevertheless and needless to say the poem is not of an equally fine texture and poetic intensity throughout. How could it possibly be? Its conclusion a little flags, its imaginative coherence wavers. There are tinges of the too fantastic and of the prosaic. Contrariwise, there are scattered stanzas which, although they are external to its own pervasive region of fantasy, and remind us of the familiar and the near, are not only of a singular precision and beauty,

but completely apposite—like transfigured objects of the waking senses seen in a dream:

It ceased; yet still the sails made on  
A pleasant noise till noon,  
A noise like of a hidden brook  
In the leafy month of June,  
That to the sleeping woods all night  
Singeth a quiet tune. . . .

and, again:

Like one that on a lonesome road  
Doth walk in fear and dread,  
And having once turned round walks on  
And turns no more his head;  
Because he knows a frightful fiend  
Doth close behind him tread. . .

Briefly, then, Coleridge based his poem on borrowed prose; he epitomized it in poetic prose; and its purest poetry moves through it like the wind in a field of wheat.

As with poets, so with men in general, and with nations. The river of the world's events and achievements flags at times into the languid and shallow, resumes its full and equable flow, or, when the moon and sun in their courses, and the elements in their apparent caprices, combine their influences, its waters overwhelm their banks, the whole countryside is under flood. The sources, energy, and direction even of the human imagination *appear* to be equally capricious.

In his *Guide to Modern English History* William Cory refers to a renewal of these waters, not only in literature, but in English life, and attributes it in part to the influence of two writers. He is speaking of the early years of the nineteenth century:

In country houses the pleasure of reading was the only pleasure that could compete with field sports. Stupidity or dullness could be lessened only by some excitement. The only literature that could excite was the romantic narrative. By the spirit of romance the sense of duty was heated. Heretofore the fictions tolerated in virtuous parlours had sounded like the purrings of tame cats. In

the Waverley period there was heard twice a year a brave man's trumpet, and no one was afraid to listen.

Of the imaginative literature issued in the same years with the Waverley novels there was a considerable proportion that affected, sooner or later, the character of the people; it was far more effectual than the contemporary music or painting. That which was first in quality, the poetry of Mr. Keats, ripened in a corner, and dropped seeds which twenty years later bore such fruit as no other nation could match. . .

He adds, of Wordsworth, 'whom Mr. Keats looked upon as one advanced into a region not yet explored by himself', that he taught his readers 'to recognize beauty in the tranquil affections of plain folks'.

Here in a convincing argument Cory signalizes as vitalizing and supreme influences—not merely on the tastes of a little clan but on the character of a great nation—the prose romances of Scott, the poetry of Keats. Nor, we may be certain, was he precluding the lyrics and narrative poems of Scott, or the letters, matchless in their kind, of John Keats. As much as the two men themselves, if one so young as Keats can be so described, these differ in theme, aim, and outlook. But whether in verse or prose, the tales, the lyrics, the letters are pervasively poetic both in principle and in effect.

And what of the century before these brave trumpets announced a new daybreak?—the literature that was taboo to the tame cats in the virtuous parlours? We are accustomed to regard the Augustan age as the age of prose; even though in music, in painting, in domestic architecture, in furniture and porcelain, in manners and the arts of society it attained a finish, serenity, seriousness, and charm which we hardly associate with the prosaic and which have not as yet been surpassed in England. Among its other activities, it ordered, tempered, refined, rationalized, and, in a word, domesticated English prose. Nevertheless the writers who were responsible for this admirable work, Gray, Johnson, Goldsmith amongst them, were themselves poets, if poets of varying magnitude. Their prose was of a piece and pitch

with their verse. How much a literary fashion and the general trend of the age hindered the full freedom and scope of their imaginations it is difficult to say. However that may be, Gray's description in a letter to a friend of a sunrise—with its wildly vivid 'and all at once a little line of unsufferable brightness'—is not less poetic in effect than the solemn and deepening twilight of the passing day that tranquilly invades our mind in reading the *Elegy*. Indeed, a grace of the spirit closely related to poetry is more frequent in his correspondence than in his odes. It would be no less difficult, too, to balance the poetic claims of Cowper the letter-writer with those of the author of *The Poplar Field*, *The Nightingale* and *the Glowworm*, and the utterly tender and natural lines to his mother's picture.

It is, again, the degree rather than the quality of the poetic that distinguishes Goldsmith's *Deserted Village* from *The Vicar of Wakefield*. Walter Scott praised Smollett's *Ode on Independence*. Sir William Blackstone, author of the *Commentaries*, having wedded the Law, bade a fond and tender farewell to his Muse:

. . . Lost to the fields, and torn from you—  
Farewell!—a long, a last adieu.  
Me wrangling courts, and stubborn law,  
To smoke, and crowds, and cities draw. . .  
Or, where in silence all is drowned,  
Fell Murder walks his lonely round;  
No room for peace, no room for you;  
Adieu, celestial nymph, adieu!  
Shakespeare, no more, thy sylvan son,  
Nor all the art of Addison,  
Pope's heaven-strung lyre, nor Waller's ease,  
Nor Milton's mighty self must please:  
Instead of these, a formal band  
In furs and coifs around me stand;  
With sounds uncouth and accents dry,  
That grate the soul of harmony,  
Each pedant sage unlocks his store  
Of mystic, dark, discordant lore. . . .

Fielding wrote verse, a lively and sonorous hunting-song,

for example, which is at least as full of music as are the horns of the huntsmen, and but one such song is proof enough that its writer is a poet, and is possessed, however intermittently, of its secret.

Not, needless to say, that any particular writer's prose is necessarily tinged with the poetic because he is an occasional versifier. But most published verse was at least intended to be poetry; and its achievement entailed a poet's discipline if not his indispensable gifts. It is (again) a discipline that has been repeatedly recommended to would-be writers of good prose. Indeed to practise voice and ear with the essentials of good verse is to ensure a due heed to the verbal music which is the *sine qua non* of poetry itself.

So, too, with those prose masterpieces, *The Tale of a Tub*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and the *Pilgrim's Progress*. One and all were the work of poets. Defoe, indeed, declared that his *Crusoe* was an allegory, which itself is a 'sustained metaphor', and includes within its range *The Divine Comedy* and the *Faërie Queene*. However closely, too, that entrancing and sovereign romance keeps to actualistic detail, it is yet a work of imagination all compact, as in another fashion are the adventures of John Bunyan's pilgrim—another allegory. 'During the latter half of the seventeenth century, there were', says Macaulay, 'only two minds which possessed the imaginative faculty in a very eminent degree. One of these minds produced the *Paradise Lost*, the other the *Pilgrim's Progress*.'

Satire and poetry again, the one destructive, the other creative in intent, are usually uneasy bedfellows, but the clarity, the vividness, the invention insisted on by all the old writers on poetry, and the imaginative illusion of the *Travels*, have set *Gulliver's* adventures—with Alice's in *Wonderland*—among the nursery classics. Alice, indeed, would find herself perfectly at home with the charming Glumdalclitch, even though she was only of the 'semi-bigness' of a *splacknuck*, and 'not above forty feet high'. It is against the background of Swift's limpid and musical prose that his bitter contempt

of the follies and vilenesses of mankind is set—like circling vultures against the harmless blue of the sky. Even at his extreme of poisoned hatred that prose resembles an anti-septic. However ‘common’ and ‘unclean’ his objects may be, they are seldom merely that. He suffuses them with his own creative interest, which in itself has an effect resembling that of beauty—just as common pebblestones, while being but pebbles, are more lustrous when under water.

The ‘unpleasant animals’, for example, encountered by Gulliver when he is set free by the buccaneers in the neighbourhood of Madagascar, are described as precisely if not so winningly—with ‘anus’ and ‘excrement’ in lieu of seed, root, and fruit—as any flower in the *Herball*; and the horses ‘walking softly’ in the fields resemble courtiers at a levee, albeit they are as virtuous as they are urbane. Until we learn that the Yahoos are meant for *us*, we shall not be scandalized, and even then may remain amused. So medical works, because their purpose is different, can expatiate on ulcers and emetics far more fully, yet less nauseatingly even than Swift. And *they* need no dulcet verbal allurements for antidote.

Swift, consummate craftsman, in part no doubt intent on his reader’s pleasure but chiefly on his own, usually ensures that his honey, even if its nectar originated in aconite or hemlock, shall sweeten his gall; that the most venomous of his gnats shall be enshrined in amber. Indeed, a satirical verse or prose vilely written is merely powder in fermenting jam. It is not in Paradise that we shall listen to *bad* sermons; and it was only in Paradise *lost* that Adam was compelled to listen to Michael’s—‘prime Angel bless’d’—on the cogent text of ‘*not too much*’. With the ‘wit’ that keeps prose sweet, Swift’s, of course, continually scintillates, but the wit itself is of a poetic cast.

One of the most imaginative fragments, again, in Dryden, in its serenity, tone, and atmosphere, is the page or two introducing his *Essay on Dramatic Poesy*. Few scenes in English fiction are so diaphanous in their realization. We



ourselves, as we read, sit like phantoms on the thwarts, listening each in turn to these four inquirers into their theme—so tranquil in their views and judgements, whatever enthusiasm may lie beneath them, as they debate in their boat being rowed upon the quiet Thames. In its special graces, the apparently heedless masculine ease and mastery of Dryden's prose at its best is unrivalled, and none but a poetic mind could be capable of it. Even his common sense is gilded with wisdom. Indeed, his verse of the antithetical order, salted with drastic criticism of life and of humanity, must surely have been a more severe restriction to his genius.

As soon as we find ourselves among the divines, the character writers, the dramatists, the merchant adventurers, the translators of the earlier centuries, Maundeville, Holland, Adlington, Thornley, Florio, including the miraculous committees who, following chiefly the genius of Tyndale, were responsible for the Authorized Version of the Bible, we are in the presence of a prose of an infinite variety, richly English, noble, exquisite, simple, elaborate, lavish or fastidious, and brimming over with the qualities of the human mind which we invariably associate with poetry itself.

Translation itself is one of the fine arts. It entails not merely the mastery of two languages and the comprehension of two orders of mind, but the subtlest intuition, and a commensurate skill in the use of words. From the supreme simplicity of the first chapter of Genesis to the visionary glories of the Revelation—Isaiah, Ecclesiastes, the Book of Job, the Song of Solomon, the Gospels of St. Luke and St. John, St. Paul's Epistles—the English Bible is of a verbal music as matchless as its meaning is profound. It is a book not only incomparably poetic, but of an incomparable diversity of the poetic.

And the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of musick shall be brought low; Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a

burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets: Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern. Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.

As we read, that spirit within us seems for the moment to have returned to a state of being and to an abode of which the earth with all its loveliness is only a partial and illusive reflection. We awaken from it, as it were; and it is then as if we became conscious that a bird which has been singing in some remote region of the mind has ceased to sing. Tree, bowl, pitcher, wheel, fountain, dust—whatever the origin of this imagery—are objects here lovely and absolute in their kind and in an inscrutable collusion. Like things enchanted they share a secret. When the soul is in eclipse, when love prevails on us, when we are away in dream, the whole of our world is changed. Such poetry as this is a record of similar transmutations. But the last chapter of Ecclesiastes is one of the most familiar in the Bible; its poetry may appeal to us doubly for this reason; and few mortals are insensitive to its theme. The Apocrypha, on the other hand is generally neglected; and here for contrast are a few verses from the second book of Esdras:

In the thirtieth year after the ruin of the city I was in Babylon, and lay troubled upon my bed, and my thoughts came up over my heart: for I saw the desolation of Sion, and the wealth of them that dwelt in Babylon. And my spirit was sore moved, so that I began to speak words full of fear to the most High.

The writer then complains bitterly of the captivity of the people of Israel, who, he pleads, in spite of their wickedness, are still the chosen people, and yet are now in subjection to enemies more impious than themselves.

And the angel that was sent unto me, whose name was Uriel, gave me an answer, and said, Thy heart hath gone too far in this world, and thinkest thou to comprehend the way of the most High?

Then said I, Yea, my lord. And he answered me, and said, I am sent to shew these three ways, and to set forth three similitudes before thee: whereof if thou canst declare me one, I will shew thee

also the way that thou desirest to see, and I shall shew thee from whence the wicked heart cometh.

And I said, Tell on, my lord. Then said he unto me, Go thy way, weigh me the weight of the fire, or measure me the blast of the wind, or call me again the day that is past.

Then answered I and said, What man is able to do that, that thou shouldest ask such things of me? And he said unto me, If I should ask thee how great dwellings are in the midst of the sea, or how many springs are in the beginning of the deep, or how many springs are above the firmament, or which are the outgoings of paradise: peradventure thou wouldest say unto me, I never went down into the deep, nor as yet into hell, neither did I ever climb up into heaven. Nevertheless now have I asked thee but only of the fire and wind, and of the day wherethrough thou hast passed, and of things from which thou canst not be separated, and yet canst thou give me no answer of them. He said moreover unto me, Thine own things, and such as are grown up with thee, canst thou not know; how should thy vessel then be able to comprehend the way of the Highest, and, the world being now outwardly corrupted, to understand the corruption that is evident in my sight? . . . Then said I unto him, It were better that we were not at all, than that we should live still in wickedness, and to suffer, and not to know wherefore.

This is not a chosen extract, but it is of unusual interest if only because it resembles Elihu's reply to Job's challenge against the Almighty, his self-vindication and vow to remain silent. And here, again, is poetry of a rare order, revealed not only in the range and vision of the experience related, but in such simplicities as 'my thoughts came up over my heart', 'thy heart hath gone too far in this world', 'call me again the day that is past', 'which are the outgoings of paradise', 'thy vessel'. The fact that 'incorruption' is given as a marginal gloss to 'corruption', and that certain phrases, in spite of their felicity, suggest a doubt of their complete fidelity to the original text, suggest the problems of the translator. This English prose is a unique *kind* of language. It is touched throughout with a certain strangeness, resembling the half-legible characters of the inscription on some time-worn ancient monument; and assuredly verse could in no virtual respect profoundly better it.

Many of the books in the Old Testament, needless to say,

are imitative renderings of Hebrew poetry, although 'if rhyme and metre are considered essential' to poetry, then that poetry 'would have to be denied to the Bible altogether'; its chief characteristics consisting 'in a certain equality, resemblance, or parallelism between the members of each period'. 'This seems to have been the most ancient and original form of poetry', and no other poetry so easily bears translation.

So also with several passages in the New Testament. If, for example, as Canon J. M. C. Crum has pointed out in a paper on this theme, corresponding sentences in the seventh chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel and the sixth chapter in St. Luke's are compared, one cannot but perceive the verbal form that is common to both:

... Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock. And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it.

And St. Luke:

... Whosoever cometh to me, and heareth my sayings, and doeth them, I will shew you to whom he is like: He is like a man which built an house, and digged deep, and laid the foundations on a rock: and when the flood arose, the stream beat vehemently upon that house, and could not shake it: for it was founded upon a rock. But he that heareth, and doeth not, is like a man that without a foundation built an house upon the earth; against which the stream did beat vehemently, and immediately it fell; and the ruin of that house was great.

Other scholars, Professor Gurney in particular, have also maintained that these and similar parables in the Gospels were, in their original Aramaic, actually spoken in a simple and familiar metrical form, a form such as could be easily, surely, and truly memorized—got by heart—by those whose ineffable experience it was to listen to them.

Even in our English version the language of the beatitudes is balanced; each exemplifies a verbal design; and none obeys it servilely. To shrink from the assertion that the beatitudes are works of art is natural enough, but would this not be due to a fallacy? The ability to communicate our simplest thoughts and feelings by means of language is acquired only after an infinitude of patience and practice from our earliest childhood, and, whatever the extent of that practice, the utmost care and pains are needed to share them adequately and well. So in an infinitely more delicate degree with the utterance of an innate wisdom, a unique spiritual insight and inspiration. We marvel at the mysteries of the water-diviner. Jesus, as he declared to the woman of Samaria, was a diviner of the waters of Life. 'The woman saith unto him, Sir, thou hast nothing to draw with, and the well is deep: from whence then hast thou that living water? . . . Jesus answered and said unto her, Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: but whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.'

Even, then, if what is in the mind flows from sources inscrutable, or from a divine well-spring, its expression—by language's very nature—cannot be purely spontaneous, wholly *art*-less. Only a confused conception of art would suggest otherwise, since art is the one achievement of man, which, so far as in him lies, has been consistently faithful to the profoundest of incentives, and in a world of the transitory is surest of a loving preservation. What has survived of thirty-five centuries of Chinese art is proof enough of that. In no essentials of impulse, conception and aim do its best examples at either extreme differ from one another. And the dilemma of the mystic (as also in a lesser degree of any one who wishes to share his delight in poetry) is not so much that of setting down his mystical experiences in words, as of making his words intelligible to those to whom any such experience is unknown. For words are not in the nature of

experience itself, but are only one incompetent means among many of attempting to convey it. A comparison between one's own and a friend's image of Eve in the Garden of Eden, as she is described in the book of Genesis, in *Paradise Lost*, in Charles Doughty's *Adam Cast Forth*, and in Mr. Ralph Hodgson's *Eva*, will reveal not only how diverse are these four poetic conceptions, but how partial and personal one's translation from words into mental imagery may be.

'What was mere language', in Mr. Odell Shepard's words, speaking of his friend Bliss Carman—and as any two poets would agree, one with the other—

What was mere language to us, after all?  
Our toil and trade and art, but not the call  
Of one mind to the other, not the blent  
Life of our thought, oh, not the thing we meant! . . .

Mr. T. S. Eliot has expressed his admiration for 'a poetry so transparent we should not see the poetry, but that which we are meant to see through the poetry, poetry so transparent that in reading it we are intent on what the poem points out and not on the poetry. . . .' But even this feat, 'to get beyond poetry', is accomplishable only through the medium of words; and all true poetry, in the last resort, springs from, and for its communication is dependent on, a rare intuition of the mind and spirit. Our words for *us* are evocative of the meaning *we* attach to them, and of that only; just as the sound of rippling or falling water may evoke in the mind not only its visual image but much—or little—else; or a bar of shadow, leaning eastward, that of the setting sun and of the night that will follow it; and perhaps, in a child, a dread of that coming night; and in an old or sick man the conviction that his own sun is declining—and may—or may not—rise again.

When [wrote Andrew Bradley] poetry answers to its idea and is purely or almost purely poetic, we find the identity of form and content . . . that embodies in its own irretrievable way something which embodies itself also in other irretrievable ways, such as philosophy or religion. . . . About the best poetry, and not only the best, there floats an atmosphere of infinite suggestion. The poet speaks to us of one thing, but in this one thing there seems to

lurk the secret of all . . . which, we feel, would satisfy not only the imagination, but the whole of us. . . .

But to return, finally, to the tenuous technical bridge that spans the interval between a richly rhythmical prose and *verse*. We read the Plays and are exhausted with admiration at their verbal mastery. Was it deliberate? Strictly speaking, the question is beside the point. What conscious skill and labour, much or little, went to the actual making of anything may be no more than a wholly deceptive index of its merit and value. It is the end that matters, not the means. That 'energy' which Johnson said was the secret of genius, and Matthew Arnold the dominant mark of the English poetic mind, may have powers and an ease in the act of creation inconceivable to those unpossessed of it. We might assume, too, that in mind and spirit the man of genius lives repeatedly if not habitually at a pitch beyond that of his fellows. Yet even at that he may be able to transfuse no more than a mere fraction of his experience into verse.

What smiling ironical look, then, would the shade of Shakespeare, the poet who could 'do easily man's utmost', bestow on any daring devotee who ventured to ask him so ingenuous a question as, 'And pray, how much, sir, in your work, did you *try*?' That is the riddle. How far in his practice was he ever a painstaking, designing, and deliberate craftsman, as, for example, Henry James in his fiction was confessedly and of set intent always a deliberate craftsman? Peerless artist, yes, though not, of course, an impeccable one; but that is another matter. Is it possible even to decide for what reason he again and again in his plays breaks, not into verse (the *usual* occasional lifelong practice with poets) but into prose—a word incidentally which he himself used only twice in those plays. To Shakespeare verse—and he used it for every conceivable purpose—rhetoric, argument, narrative, wit, humour, gossiping, bawdying, hair-splitting, badinage, fantasy, passion, and, above all, poetry—appears to have become an almost spontaneous language; prose, and as masterly a prose, a departure from it. Like Monsieur

Jourdain, however, he must have talked in prose, even if he seldom wrote in it. One of the extremely few fragments of a purely personal character we have of his is the dedication to the *Venus and Adonis*—and that also to *Lucrece*. He himself is speaking here—if somewhat ceremoniously and after the manner of his age. The dedication consists of 150 words, and some forty of them, with the barest manipulation, are metrical. He even versifies his subscription: *Yōur hōn | ōur's īn āll | dūtŷ | Wīllīām | Shākēspēare*. Here, also, are no fewer than three metaphors: heir; prop; barren land and harvest. So, too, with the dedication of *Lucrece*.

*The Tempest*—perhaps the last written of his plays—begins in prose; but it is a prose which may be metricalized into:

Blow, till thou burst thy wind, if room enough! . . .  
 What cares these roarers for the name of king? . . .  
 Cheerly, good hearts!—Out of our way, I say.

Possibly the complete passage is merely disarranged blank verse, but verse openly begins only when the desperate 'Mariners' enter:

This wide-chapp'd rascal,—would thou mightst lie drowning  
 The washing of ten tides!

In the second act Antonio, Sebastian, and Adrian interlard their cynical facetiousness in prose with,

Fie, what a spendthrift is he of his tongue . . .

and with,

Save means to live; of that there's none, or little. . . .

When Alonzo enters all talk in verse. Ariel, speech and song, keeps solely to verse; Caliban now to verse, now to prose, according to what company he is in.

Briefly and generally, Shakespeare's kings and queens and the more ceremonious of his noblemen use a highly oratorical blank verse. But not all of them. Duncan is always brief and always poet; Oberon and Titania learned their English of the bees. The punning worldly-minded wits converse



for the most part in a slightly euphuistic prose, bordering closely on verse, and resembling the letters quoted in the plays. His humorous characters—including even that vast Punchinello of the poetical, Falstaff,<sup>1</sup> his clowns, fools, townsmen, rustics, mechanicals, serving men, assistant murderers, watchmen and gravediggers, keep for the most part to prose—a prose rich, racy, condensed and sweet enough to set up in their trade at least a score of young minor poets. And, like Bosola's speeches in *The Duchess of Malfi* on the same theme, one of the most poetic passages in *Hamlet*, the soliloquy on man, is in a highly figured, richly rhythmized, all but metrical prose.

Shakespeare's language, that is, continually adapts its levels, from the wholly prosaic to the supremely poetic; and this in keeping with the phantasm of his imagination, the character, who is making use of it. And his songs, those matchless lyrics—in what is only a finer music—take their cue as readily from their context as a snowdrop blooming in January, 'a bird that talks of the spring'. Let, indeed, the gifted young poet of our own day take, as he did so early, to romantic comedy, there should soon be no dearth of neo-Edwardian *song*.

There is no containing him, no tether to keep him within bounds, no withies to bind him. Nevertheless, like every poet, Shakespeare must in his youth have been a novice, and, throughout his life a sedulous craftsman in words; as Michelangelo was in stone and pigment, and Bach in sounds. And although of his daily life and habits, of his speech and gestures, way of looking and laughing, of spend-

<sup>1</sup> 'I do remember him at Clement's Inn like a man made after supper of a cheese-paring: when a' was naked he was for all the world like a forked radish, with a head fantastically carved upon it with a knife: a' was so forlorn that his dimensions to any thick sight were invincible: a' was the very genius of famine; yet lecherous as a monkey, and the whores called him mandrake: a' came ever in the rearward of the fashion and sung those tunes to the overscutched huswives that he heard the carmen whistle, and sware they were his fancies or his good-nights. And now is this Vice's dagger become a squire. . . .'

ing his solitude, and the private trend of his spirit, we know little for certain, in one thing, as with Coleridge and Keats, we can—and actually pace for pace—trace his footprints in other men's snow. We can, that is, watch him at work not only in his use of theme and story, as in *Lear* and *Macbeth*, but in the act of edging, persuading, transmuting a borrowed prose into his own superb verse; and this in particular in his Roman plays—*Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar*, *Antony*. To any diligent writer, to any student of verbal art and craft, such passages as these are of an inexhaustible interest, since they reveal not only the bias of Shakespeare's mind and character, but the positive process of his workmanship. Supreme dramatist that he was, we might assume (what in certain vital respects *All's Well that Ends Well* proves untrue) that he can never have failed to improve on his original; that his verse, in its poetical qualities at least, must invariably have excelled what he borrowed. This, however, is not always so. Usually he may win on the exchange, occasionally he loses, or the honours are easy.

Sir Thomas North, translating Plutarch's Greek, chiefly, it seems, through the French of Amyot, is speaking of Cleopatra—and in the most delicate and vigorous rhythms, many of which the slightest emphasis will at once convert into the metrical:

When she was sent unto by divers letters, both from Antonius him selfe and also from his frendes, she made so light of it, and mocked Antonius so much, that she disdained to set forward otherwise, but to take her barge in the river of Cydnus, the poepe whereof was of gold, the sailes of purple, and the owers of silver, which kept stroke in rowing after the sounde of the musicke of flutes, howboyes, citherns, violles, and such other instruments as they played upon in the barge. And now for the person of her self: she was layed under a pavillion of cloth of gold of tissue, appparelled and attired like the goddesse Venus, commonly drawen in picture: and hard by her, on either hand of her, pretie faire boyes appparelled as painters doe set forth god Cupide, with little fannes in their hands, with which they fanned wind upon her. Her ladies and gentlewomen also, the fairest of them were appparelled like the nymphes Nereides (which are the mermaides of the waters) and

like the Graces, some steering the helme, others tending the tackle and ropes of the barge, out of which there came a wonderful passing sweete savor of perfumes, that perfumed the wharfes side pestered with innumerable multitudes of people. Some of them followed the barge all alongest the rivers side: others also ranne out of the citie to see her coming in. So that in thend, there ranne such multitudes of people one after an other to see her, that Antonius was left post alone in the market place, in his Imperiall seate to geve audience: and there went a rumor in the peoples mouthes that the goddessse Venus was come to play with the god Bacchus, for the generall good of all Asia. . . .

Is it possible, one might speculate, that anything so compact, serene, vivid, musical, and imaginative could by *any* technical device be bettered—given another and richer kind of life? Is it not suffused with poetry, as water may be suffused with wine, the heart with a loving gratitude?

If we watch an ash or a willow tree when its leaves, twigs, and branches are in a continually variable motion in the stream and currents of the wind, we are in the presence of a ravishing natural rhythm—like that of a fine prose. When we realize that this exquisitely coloured, gentle and deliberate bowing and swaying, surrender and recovery, this give and take, these almost oriental obeisances are in obedience to the wind itself, a wind whose currents in turn are themselves obedient to certain states of the atmosphere, our delight in it, surely, is intensified. The rhythms are now in the nature of those in verse. So with that beguiling little bird, the spotted flycatcher. Not far from his mate in her nest, he perches on a twig made bare by his repeated visitings. And in a moment or two he may describe a series of brief unfaltering fluttering loops, possibly five or even seven in number, and with the last of them he will return once more to his perch. He *appears* to be wholly at liberty—as does the writer in prose, though this, too, is entirely a question of degree. Actually the small bird is confined within the limits of a selected larder; and in this he resembles the writer in verse.

If that is not too fantastic a comparison, and North's

translation may be taken as the tree and the larder, here are the winds and the wings of Shakespeare. It is Enobarbus who is speaking, until this moment content with prose so little removed from verse as 'Ay, sir; we did sleep day out of countenance, and made the night light with drinking,' and as, 'when she first met Mark Antony she pursed up his heart, upon the river of Cydnus;' and then, verse deliberate:

'The barge she sat in, like a burnish'd throne,  
Burn'd on the water; the poop was beaten gold,  
Purple the sails, and so perfumed, that  
The winds were love-sick with them, the oars were silver,  
Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made  
The water which they beat to follow faster,  
As amorous of their strokes. For her own person,  
It beggar'd all description; she did lie  
In her pavilion,—cloth-of-gold of tissue,—  
O'er-picturing that Venus where we see  
The fancy outwork nature; on each side her  
Stood pretty-dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids,  
With divers-colour'd fans, whose wind did seem  
To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool,  
And what they undid did.'

'O! rare for Antony.'

'Her gentlewomen, like the Nereides,  
So many mermaids, tended her i' the eyes,  
And made their bends adornings; at the helm  
A seeming mermaid steers; the silken tackle  
Swell with the touches of those flower-soft hands,  
That yarely frame the office. From the barge  
A strange invisible perfume hits the sense  
Of the adjacent wharfs. The city cast  
Her people out upon her, and Antony,  
Enthron'd i' the market-place, did sit alone,  
Whistling to the air; which, but for vacancy,  
Had gone to gaze on Cleopatra too  
And made a gap in nature. . . .'

Due allowance having been made for his *debt* to North, and for the difficulty of transmuting what he might more easily have invented, the poet has triumphed; but to what extent, and at what sacrifice? First, he dramatizes narrative, em-

bodies a spectator—and with what a magical intervention, ‘O! rare for Antony’. Next, among much else, he makes magnificence of what seemed simple. He adds (for Enobarbus’s purposes) his own nature’s art to that of his original. The winds become lovesick, the waters so amorous that they *follow* faster; even the wharfs are given sensibilities. His queen ‘beggars description’, over-pictures not merely a natural but an ideal portrayal of Venus. The little fans are now divers-coloured, and, by rosyng the delicate cheeks paled with the coolness they bestow, what they do, undo. That wonderful passing sweet savour of perfumes is become strange and ‘invisible’. He silken the ship’s tackle, softens the mermaids’ hands, and *twice* perfumes the air. He emotionalizes, intensifies, but also beautifies the passage, a process not always equivalent either to improving or making poetry of it. ‘To the tune of flutes’, contrariwise, is hardly an adequate exchange for ‘the sound of the music of flutes’. And why only flutes now? The actions of the nymphs and ‘prettie faire’ boys are slightly confused, and even if we admit that Enobarbus is improvising (he has already described Cleopatra in prose), ‘So many mermaids’ is little more than stuffing to fill the line, and ‘a seeming mermaid’ a little flat in effect if not in sound.

But compare North’s ‘barge’ with the similitude of the burning burnished throne; his ‘there ran such multitudes of people one after another to see her’, with the even more biblical and condensed, ‘the city cast Her people out upon her . . .’; compare these masters, phrase by phrase, down to Shakespeare’s ‘whistling to the air’, an air which—with an astonishing and characteristic access of visual genius—he converts into ‘an air

which *but for vacancy*  
Had gone to gaze on Cleopatra too  
And made a gap in *nature*.’

Alike in the prose and in the verse, then, of these two passages—just as there are leaves, buds, and flowers on the same tree—are there not manifest degrees of the poetic;

either rendering, in turn, and in fragments, falling short of, equalling, or excelling the other?

One capital advantage the Elizabethan dramatists and poets had over those of our own day: however much they may have written—some two thousand plays in a few decades—they had incomparably less to read. And that for the most part was of a far higher standard. Another quarry frequented by Shakespeare was Holinshed's *Chronicles*. These were written to record and to instruct, and their prose, though seldom less than admirable of its kind, is at times a little crabbed, involved and wearisome. But, if a casual rather than a thorough knowledge of them is enough guidance, when due occasion offers it instantly rises to meet it. It reflects its varying themes, that is, as the placid waters of a river reflect the scenery upon its banks. There appears to be no fine writing for fine writing's sake, only for veracity's sake. Here, for example, are a few lines from a description of the 'bankettings' and other 'jollie pastimes' at Shrovetide in the Parliament Chamber at Westminster, intended to entertain the ambassadors in 1510, the year when there was 'a grievous visitation of the plague'. It is merely a description of the fine clothes:

. . . Then certeine gentlemen followed with torches, apparelled in blue damaske, purfelled with amis greie, fashioned like an albe, and hoods on their heads, with robes and long tippets to the same of blue damaske, in visards. Then after them came a certeine number of gentlemen, whereof the king was one, apparelled all in one sute of short garments, little beneath the points, of blue velvet and crimson, with long sleeves, all cut and lined with cloth of gold. And the utter part of the garments were powdered with castels and sheafes of arrowes of fine ducket gold; the upper parts of their hosen of like sute and fashion, the nether parts were of skarlet, powdered with timbrels of fine gold, on their heads bonnets of damaske, with silver flat woven in the stole, and thereupon wrought with gold, and rich fethers in them, all with visors.

After them entered six ladies, whereof two were apparelled in crimson sattin and purple, embrodered with gold, and by viniets ran floure delices of gold, with marvellous rich & strange tiers on their heads. Then two ladies in crimson and purple, made like

long slops [loose breeches] embrodered and fret with gold after antike fashion: and over that garment was a short garment of cloth of gold scant to the knee, fashioned like a tabard all over, with small double rolles, all of flat gold of damaske, fret with frised gold, and on their heads skarfs and wrappers of damaske gold, with flat pipes, that strange it was to behold. . .

The music of the words, let alone rhyme and rhythm, rivals the colour of the apparel. And this, of a woman's beauty:

. . . She [the widow of sir Iohn Graie knight] was a woman of a more formall countenance than of excellent beautie; and yet both of such beautie and fauour, that with hir sober demeanour, sweete looks, and comelie smiling (neither too wanton, nor too bashfull) besides hir pleasant toong and trim wit, she so alured and made subject unto hir the heart of that great prince, [Edward the Fourth] that after she had denied him to be his paramour, with so good maner, and words so well set as better could not be devised; he finallie resolved with himselfe to marrie hir, not asking counsell of anie man, till they might perceive it was no bootie to advise him to the contrarie of that his concluded purpose; sith he was so farre gone that he was not revocable, and therefore had fixed his heart upon the last resolution: namelie, to applie an holesome, honest, and honourable remedie to his affections fiered with the flames of love, and not to permit his heart to the thraldome of unlawful lust; which purpose was both princelie and profitable; as the poet saith:

Utile propositum est saevas extinguere flammas,  
Nec servum vitiis pectus habere suum.

And last, narrative of a tragic intensity that verse has seldom excelled:

. . . The lord Clifford [stigmatized as 'the Butcher']. . . perceiving where the earle of Rutland was conveied out of the field . . . and overtaking him, stabbed him to the heart with a dagger as he kneeled afore him. This earle was but a child at that time of twelve ycares of age, whome neither his tender yeares, nor dolorous countenance, with holding up both his hands for mercie (for his speach was gone for feare) could moove the cruell heart of the lord Clifford to take pitie upon him. . . The same lord Clifford not satisfied herewith, came to the place where the dead corpse of the duke of Yorke laie, caused his head to be stricken off, and set on it a crowne of paper, fixed it to a pole and presented it on the queene, not lieng farre from the field, in great despite, at which great rejoising was shewed: but || they laughed then that shortlie after lamented, | and were

glád then of other méns déaths that kñéw | not their ówne to be  
so néere at hánd. Some wríte | that the dúke was táken álíve, and  
ín derísion || caused to stand vpon a molehill, on whose head they  
put a garland in steed of a crowne, which they had fashioned and  
made of sedges or bulrushes; and having so crowned him with  
that garland, they kneeled downe afore him (as the Iewes did  
vnto Christ) in scorne, saieng to him; || ‘Haile king without rule,  
haile king without heritage, | haile duke and prince without people  
or possessions.’ || And at length having thus scorned him with these  
and diverse other the like despitfull words, they stroke off his head,  
which (as yee have heard) they presented to the queene. . . .

*The Lamentable and True Tragedie of M. Arden of Feversham*, again, is a dramatist’s transcription of an account of a murder recorded by Holinshed, for which five men and two women were burned or hanged. Its common attribution to Shakespeare is now viewed with ‘respectful incredulity’. But quite apart from the question of its authorship, a brief comparison will reveal that its adaptation, scintillating here and there though it is with poetic genius, falls short of the prose of its original—not only in its general fabric but in certain vividly dramatic details: the holding of the candle, for example, to dazzle the victim as he sat over his game of backgammon or draughts with his rival; and Alice Arden’s remorseless ‘seven or eight picks into the breast’ after the murder has been done. Holinshed gave the poet every impulse he needed—more, indeed, than he could use—including Alice herself: ‘a gentlewoman, young, tall, and well favoured of shape and countenance’; and even such names for his third and fourth murderers—Blacke Will and Shakebag—as no melodramatist could excel! And the few fragments of dialogue recorded are not only aptly placed, and condense and emphasize both narrative and action, they are almost as near verse as prose can come. “‘Yea (said she)’”,—it is Alice Arden conferring on the subject of poison with the painter who has no part in the play—“‘Yea, but I would have such a one made, as should have most vehement and speedie operation to dispatch the eater thereof’”; “‘That can I doo”



(quoth he) and forthwith made hir such a one. . .'; "Mistresse Ales what milke have you given me here?" Where-withall she tilted it over with hir hand, saieng, "I weene nothing can please you"; "By his blood", cries blacke Will, "I know not, nor care not, but set up my staffe, and even as it falleth I go." "Now maie I take you sir if I will." "Take me (quoth maister Arden) which waie?"; "Then she sent for two Londoners to supper, the one named Prune, and the other Cole, that were grosers, which before the murder was committed, were bidden to supper. When they came, she said: "I marvell where maister Arden is; we will not tarie for him, come ye and sit downe, for he will not be long:" i.e.

. . . I

Marvell where maister Arden is; we will  
Not tarie for him; come ye and sit downe,  
For he will not be long. . .

And last that cry of appalled lamentation: 'Oh the bloud of God helpe, for this bloud have I shed.' . . .

To return from the days of Elizabeth to our own. Poetry, which is the immortal offspring of wonder and delight, was in the very air the Elizabethans breathed. Theirs was an unparalleled background, renewed, apparently inexhaustible, largely unexplored, wherein the brighter and more enticing colours of the imagination could best shine forth. The writers of the century, like adventurers seeking El Dorado, were in a state of mind eager and vigilant, discovering marvels, idealizing the heroic, in love with and beset by the romantic. Theirs was the prose, says W. E. Henley, of adventure and romance and these 'are the best motives for sound and spirited English'. There is indeed a grace, a flexibility, ease, brilliance, and fullness in the words with which they carry their matter, whether it be of fact or of the imagination—as a brimming river bears a ship upon its flood. At its best, Elizabethan prose is faithful to its meaning in rhythm, cadence, colour, and rapidity. Its words are a true reflection, an echo of their true sense, with its respondent

phrasing and antitheses, onsets and withdrawals, like the waters of an incoming tide. It may occasionally threaten to sweep on to a loose and flaccid end; then suddenly will recover itself, and all is balance and propriety. It was a 'level of prose far higher than our own'. Why?

Of life's natural riches and resources—apart from the wear and tear of time's destruction—there remains with us all that these writers exulted in, and how much else beside! Only the pen of omniscience, endowed with our available vocabulary of five hundred thousand words, compared with the six thousand that sufficed for the translators of the Bible, could exhaustively expatiate upon it. Yet, as individuals, we can stand each with his own small vessel under this Niagara and fill that at least to the brim. If nowadays, however, the possessor of a spirited and vigorous imagination, in the fullness of his heart and with a passion to reveal his gratitude, desires to express himself in words, is an appropriate and *acceptable* language easily at his command? Has there occurred, as it were, another gap, but this in human nature?

We are surrounded with a boundless wilderness of print. It affords admirable and abundant oases, but how describe the sterility and flatness, the inanition of its sands? Literature is an art—in English a most excellent art—and that art, however numerous its varieties may be, is one. But to what fraction of the multitudinous books that cascade from our presses can the word be freely and fully applied—in any precise sense? And how many of them are within even echo of poetry? There is the language of fact; there is the language appropriate to fiction, at present chiefly concerned with naturalism, realism, actualism; there is the current ideal of good prose—that it shall be plain, direct, economical, rational, restrained; and there is verse, and free verse. But the writing of verse is a craft entailing arduous practice. Its very rules and regulations to some extent restrict its range of theme and treatment. The ability to make an admirable use of its various and manifold technical devices appears to be innate; it is at any rate extremely difficult to acquire.

Even a due appreciation of it as a literary form—at least when childhood has been left behind—implies in some degree the qualities of mind it needs for its mastery. There is the consequent danger, in view of an audience so restricted, of narrowing its scope, of tending to make it a precious preserve for the delectation solely of the fastidious, and the few. The mere technical barrier, which as soon as it is overcome ceases of course to be artificial, is extreme.

Not, indeed, that a fine prose of any order is easy of achievement. Because rather than in spite of its freedom, as compared with verse, it is in certain respects a more difficult technique. Nor can prose reach that perfection of poetry to which verse alone at its best and loveliest attains. But if the imaginative and the poetic are states of the mind differing from the normal only in degree, then they need for their complete expression a language equally gradual and comprehensive. It is a prose such as this that in centuries gone by became the medium for how many supremely gifted and creative minds. So long as we insist on narrowing its range, may we not also be narrowing our opportunities for a poetic and imaginative delight? Be that as it may, the realm of poetry extends far beyond that of the confines of verse. And Shelley, in attempting to illustrate the meaning which he attached to the word, so expresses himself in prose as to prove how closely and naturally akin it may be even to his own enchanting lyrics:

Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds. We are aware of evanescent visitations of thought and feeling, sometimes associated with place or person, sometimes regarding our own mind alone, and always arising unforeseen and departing unbidden, but elevating and delightful beyond all expression: so that even in the desire and the regret they leave, there cannot but be pleasure, participating as it does in the nature of its object. It is as it were the interpenetration of a diviner nature through our own; but its footsteps are like those of a wind over the sea, which the morning calm erases, and whose traces remain only, as on the wrinkled sand which paves it. . .

Poets are not only subject to these experiences as spirits of the most refined organization, but they can colour all that they combine with the evanescent hues of this ethereal world; a word, a trait, in the representation of a scene or a passion, will touch the enchanted chord, and reanimate, in those who have ever experienced those emotions, the sleeping, the cold, the buried image of the past. . .

## NOTE

THERE are many methods of specifying the 'longs' and 'shorts' in prose and verse, though none is without its own disadvantages. A musical notation is limited to units, halves, quarters and eighths. That of more precise fractions (even if they are accurate) is impracticable to follow with any complete delicacy. Although no such system deals with varying inflexions or intonations, or with the abstruse accordancies of speech sounds, some notation is an indispensable convenience, even though it may be little better than that. Adequate rhythmical readings indeed differ according to taste.

In the course of this paper I have used the common notations: the sign  $-$  for a long, and  $\cup$  for a short; and also the sign  $'$  to denote accent or stress. This was intended to save too many loosely discriminating shorts ( $\cup$ ). The sign  $\wedge$ , used only occasionally, is intended to signify a paramount accent, stress or emphasis; or, possibly, all three. Here perhaps I may be forgiven for referring to a note in an anthology of poems compiled for children.

In some poems even the metre, let alone the rhythm, at first sight may be doubtful. . . There are at least four ways, for example, of stressing the six longer lines in the stanza-form of Drayton's 'Agincourt':

- (a) Fāir stood the wīnd fōr Frānce;
- (b) Fāir stood the wīnd fōr Frānce;
- (c) Fāir stood the wīnd fōr Frānce;
- (d) Fāir stood the wīnd fōr Frānce.

(a) if persisted in, becomes a miserable sing-song; (b) mere capering; (c) is stern, solemn, resolute; and (d) admits perhaps of the greatest variety of rhythm and intonation. Perhaps the best way is to treat each stanza as if it were composed of two metrical units—lines 1-4 and 5-8—and to read these with as many or as few variations as will provide the fullest possible 'meaning'. Varying

emphasis may be shown by means of differing types; but this rather clumsy method also gives no indication of the appropriate inflexions, the verbal melody:

*They now to fight are gone*  
*Ar-mour on armour shone*  
*Drum now to drum did groan*  
*To hear—was wonder;*  
*That with the cries they make*  
*The very earth did shake;*  
*Trumpet to trumpet spake,*  
*Thun—der to thunder.*

In verse, and to a lesser degree in prose, the majority of monosyllables in English may be either long or short, according to the craftsman's need, and conscience. Longer vowels, except in quantity, for example, than the *i*'s in the sentence, 'Arise, shine, for thy light is come', it would be difficult to link together in so brief a space; yet they easily transmute themselves into the shortish, if not into shorts, in:

The breēze | arīsing gent | lȳ, the moon | beams shīning sweetlȳ,  
 Light veiled | her clear face | as she stooped | o'er the stream.

In the process of composition the poet, too, even if inaudibly, *speaks*, we may assume, his words, not merely listens to them; and it may be the varying effort of pronouncing his syllables that in *part* distinguishes for him his longs from his shorts: the vocal conformations. And it is emphasis, the energy bestowed by interest and emotion, that may lengthen longs, and for metrical purposes convert a short into a long at need, though seldom in words of more than one syllable. E.g. 'Oh̄ nō peāce nōw, griēf-strickēn heart, hērē's rest!' which rhythmically and as prose we should read, 'Oh̄ | nō peāce nōw, | griēf-strickēn heart, | hērē's rest!'

This endlessly complex and delicate question of rhythm, however, has, needless to say, been no more than superficially touched on in the preceding pages; and, apart from other authorities, I had not the advantage when writing them of having seen, let alone studied, Mr. Norton R. Tempest's *The Rhythm of English Prose*.















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